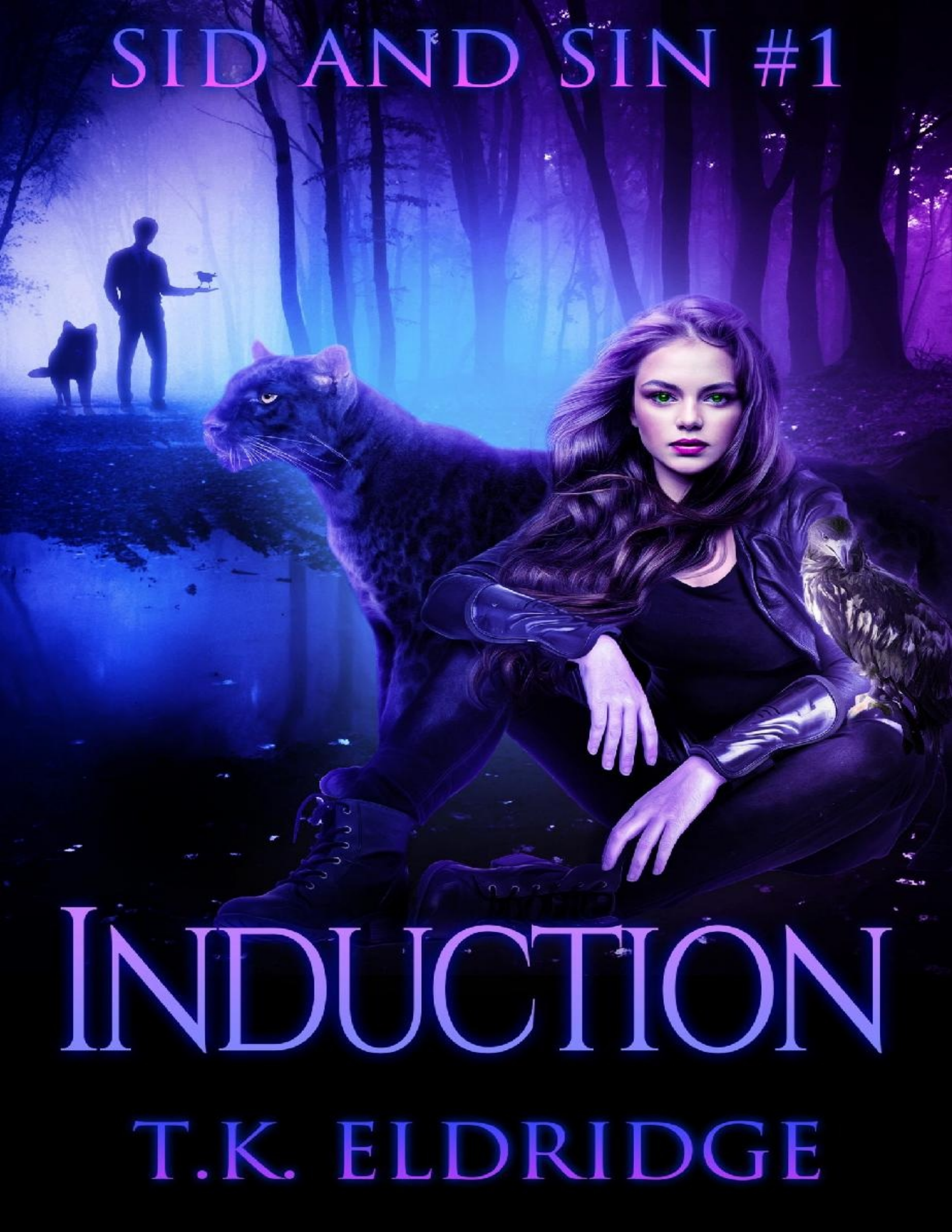
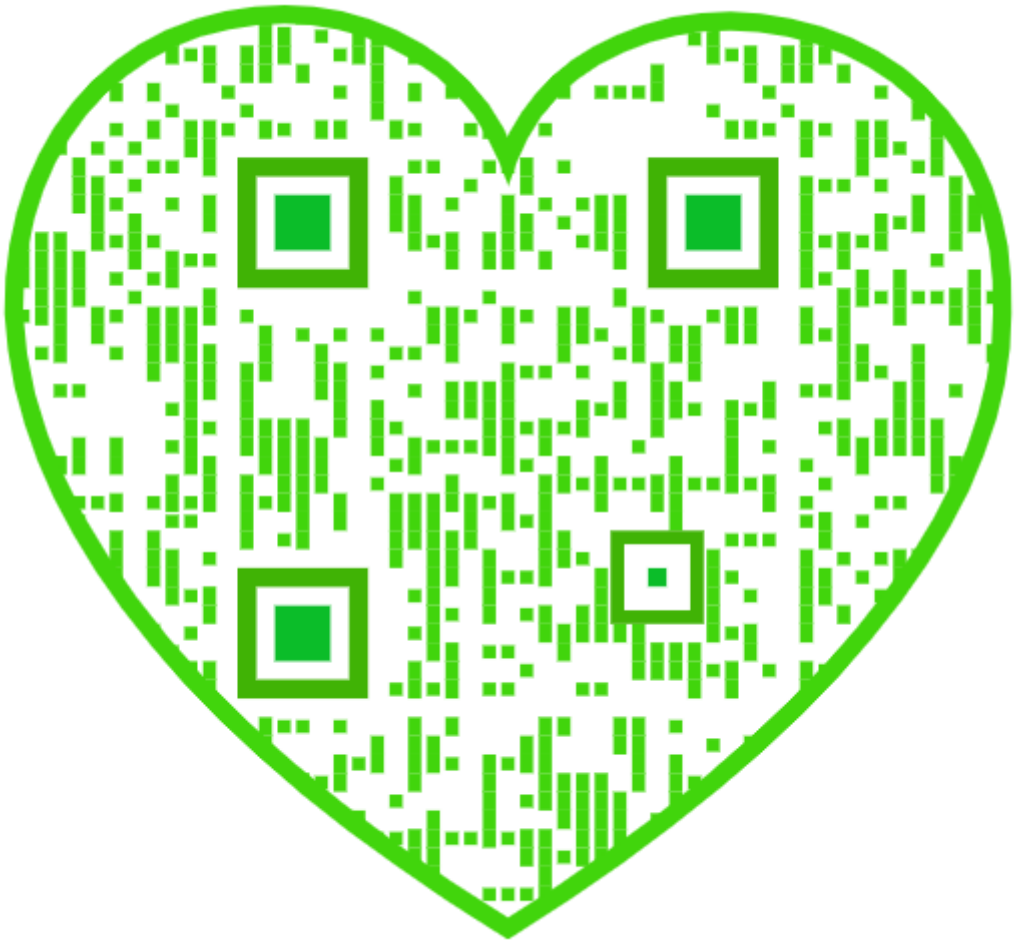
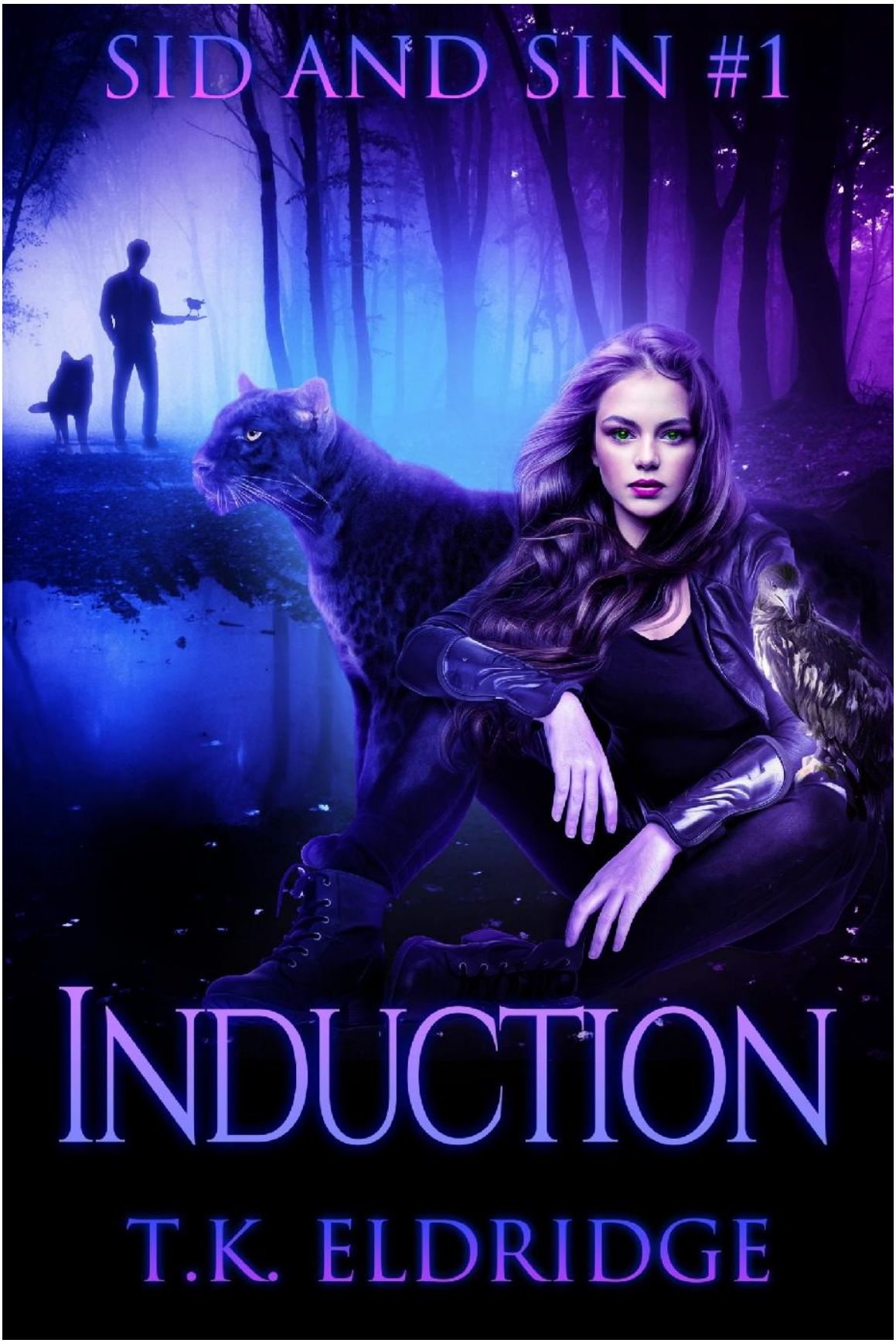
SID AND SIN #1



INDUCTION

T.K. ELDRIDGE




SID AND SIN #1
INDUCTION
T.K. ELDRIDGE

T.K. Eldridge

Induction

Sid & Sin #1

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To all those who came before.

Your dreams, struggles, loves, and lives are what created me.

What I do with that, is all on me.

“Suddenly all my ancestors are behind me.
Be still, they say. Watch and listen.
You are the result of the love of thousands.”

- Linda Hogan

Chapter One

Sid

This was not how I had planned to spend the Friday after final exams. A week of high-pressure testing was supposed to end with a day of pampering with the girls. Followed by good food and a night of drinking with the whole gang. It was not supposed to be spent standing around a smelly police station, watching a guy I'd turned down more than a few times question my brother.

I stared at Jenkins for a few minutes. He was a mundane. Nothing special about him at all, if you didn't count his arrogance.

You could see the paranormals if you knew what to look for. Witches had that veil-thin shimmer around them, like heat rising off of asphalt. Shifters got that animalistic green glint in their eye when the light caught them just right. Me? I just confused the hell out of them. Sometimes I shimmered, sometimes my eyes caught the light just so, and sometimes I could hide it all. Same with my brother, Sin. The whole hiding thing? We think it's because we're twins. Or maybe because we're not supposed to exist in the first place.

I stood with my back against the wall and watched as my twin brother twisted his ball cap into a nest of cloth and cardboard. The cops had wanted to talk to him first, which was fine with me. I had nothing to say. I had fallen asleep in my friend Aaron's car and barely woke in time for my ten o'clock class. I never made it home last night. Listening to Sin, it sounded like he hadn't made it home either.

I was starving. It was time to put the Boudreau moxie into play. I sauntered over to the table and leaned a hip against the sticky metal surface.

"Officer Jenkins, could you please tell us what is going on? I've got…plans." I gave him my best sexy smile and peered up at him through my lashes. Hell, I even bit my lower lip.

Sin leaned back and folded his arms over his chest. "Yeah, I think we're done here. I've told you where I was, what I was doing and who I was with. My sister and I need to get home."

Jenkins smirked and shook his head. "Damned Boudreaus always think you're better'n everybody else. Well, you're not. Sit down and I'll ask all the questions I want."

My sultry look disappeared, and I sighed as if he'd just disappointed me beyond measure. "Okay. Lawyer."

"What?" Jenkins snapped.

"Law…yerrr. Lawyer. You either get us a lawyer now or you let us go," I told him. Hey, pre-Law classes came in handy for something. That, and family history.

"What about you?" Jenkins asked Sinclair.

"Lawyer," Sin said.

"Well, fuck you both. Go ahead. But good luck getting into your house," Jenkins smirked as he got up, grabbed his notebook and stormed away before we could ask him what he meant by that.

I took one look at Sin. He nodded then said, "My car's outside. Let's go."

Once we were in his car, I asked Sin how he'd ended up at the station. "Stumpy called and said they needed to talk to me, so I drove here. How'd you get here?"

"Stumpy. He picked me up outside Kittredge Hall after my sociology final."

"Where's your car?"

"Home. Bella came and got me last night and we hung out at Aaron's. He dragged me to the campus with him but his exam was at eight, so I slept in his car until time for my exam at ten. Went in, took it, came out and there was Stumpy."

Stumpy was actually Detective Patrick Clancy, our dad's best friend since they were toddlers. We couldn't say 'Clancy' when we were little and ended up calling him Stumpy. It stuck. He was more of an uncle to us than our blood uncle who had lived on the other side of the continent most of our lives but now lived in town.

"Well, if Stumpy called you and picked me up, why was Jenkins the one questioning us? What the fuck happened that Stumpy wasn't there?" Sin asked as he pulled up next door to our house. We couldn't get any closer with all of the police cars around.

"I think we're about to find out," I said and got out. "Stumpy's car is over there." Something cold settled in my chest. I reached out for Sin's hand as he came around the car. "I'm scared," I whispered to him.

"You're not facing this alone, Sid. Never alone," Sin said and squeezed my hand.

"Never alone," I repeated. Our mantra whenever we had to face something that made us worry.

We walked past my cherry red Mini and our parents' SUVs, one silver, one black. Crime scene tape blocked the path to the front door along with two officers. We made our way around the cars to the side of the house. I pulled out my keys, unlocked the back door, and we entered the kitchen. Both of us slapped our hands over our noses as the *smell* hit us.

"What *is* that smell?" I asked Sin.

"Blood. It's blood," Sin said.

Leave it to the pre-Med student to know what blood smells like. Two steps into the kitchen and we saw where the smell was coming from. It was sprayed all over the kitchen and into the dining room. Belle Cove police and crime scene techs were

taking samples, photos, and examining everything from the kitchen on through to the front door.

"Hey, you two can't be in here," yelled one of the techs.

"Fuck you, we *live* here," Sin snapped back.

"Not right now, you don't. This is a crime scene. Who let you in here?" The tech wore blue paper booties splattered with blood as he edged around a particularly large smear. I held up my keys.

"Like he said. We live here. What the hell is going on?" I told him.

The tech sighed and shook his head. "Go back out and around to the patio. I'll send Detective Clancy out to talk to you, okay? Just…be careful where you step."

Sin took my arm and led me back to the door. "Thank you," he muttered as he ushered me outside. I was a mixture of furious and completely freaked out, so of course, I snapped at my brother. "What the fuck was that? You're going to let some twit tell us to get out?"

"It's a crime scene, Sid. Let's let them do their job. We'll have plenty of time to do ours when they're done."

I stomped around the back of the house to the patio and dropped onto a cushioned rocker. Once I pulled out my phone, I dialed Mom's number. She'd be pissed that I bothered her during work hours, but this was serious. Our house was a blood-splattered disaster area.

The call went to voicemail.

I tried Dad's number.

Same thing.

"Sin, why are Mom and Dad's phones going to voicemail?" Yeah, I know, you probably think I'm being a clueless idiot and not putting one and one together. It was not my finest moment.

"Sid, where do you think all the blood came from?"

I stopped dialing and shook my head. “No, if they were dead, we’d feel it. Right?”

Sin just looked at me.

“Right, Sin?”

“I don’t know, Sid. That’s an awful lot of blood for someone to still be alive.”

“But they’re powerful, Sin. They wouldn’t go down easy.”

“No, they wouldn’t. That’s why the house is so trashed.”

“Well, if they’re dead, where are the bodies?”

Stumpy came around the corner as I said that and shook his head. “There are no bodies.”

He was holding an evidence bag with a piece of paper in it. “This was stuck on the front door. There are no prints on it.”

Sin took the bag and read the note. “We have Andre and Amelia. We will exchange them for Sinclair and Sidonie at Arcadia Park in two days at sunset. If they do not present themselves, we will kill the parents.”

I took a breath. “We’ll be there.”

“Not alone,” Stumpy said. “If you plan on using yourselves as bait, I’ll be bringing cops to keep you safe and help take down the kidnappers.”

“Right, because anyone strong enough to take both of our parents, leave that much blood and still put a coherent note on the door, won’t notice cops skulking around the park,” Sin said.

“Did the cops find out if the blood was our parents’ blood or something else?” I didn’t want to think about Mom or Dad losing that much blood or what condition they’d be in now if it was all theirs.

“They can’t tell yet. The lab will have to test it,” Stumpy said.

“What about magical means?” Sin asked.

I saw something shift in Stumpy’s expression. If I hadn’t been looking at him, I would’ve missed it.

“The SPD was on another case and couldn’t come. We’re only using Belle Cove’s PD,” Stumpy said.

“What the actual fuck, Stumpy?” I could feel the rage boiling through me. “The SPD was on another case? That’s absolute bullshit and you know it.”

Sin turned away from us both and punched the side of the house, denting the siding.

Stumpy just looked down at the patio stones under our feet while I raged.

“This is because of their archaic ideas of what is acceptable in paranormal society. Can’t have witches and shifters mating. If they do manage to have kids, those kids are mutant monsters. Well, fuck their acceptance and to hell with their bullshit.”

Sin turned to Stumpy, voice deceptively calm. “Are we allowed to go up the back stairs and get some of our things out of our rooms? We need clothes and such for the next couple of days.”

“Yeah, I’ll make sure they’re done upstairs,” Stumpy said. “Give me fifteen minutes.”

I watched Stumpy leave and turned to Sin. “I’ll grab clothes and toiletries for us both, you hit the attic and get everything else. If you can’t carry it, put it in the trunk and spell it.”

“Exactly what I planned on doing,” Sin replied. “We can’t let them get into the attic. I know they haven’t yet because they’re Danes. But if the kidnappers come back or someone from SPD shows up, they might get past the wards.”

“Where are we going to stay? The cabin?” Our Grandpa had a cabin on Syren Lake, about half an hour from here. No one in the family used it but us because it was deep in shifter territory.

“Yeah, that’s our best option. At least we’ll be protected there,” Sin said.

“Don’t forget to hide the trunk and set the trap. No wards, you know they look for those.”

"I won't," he whispered as Stumpy came back out.

"You can go up and get whatever you need. And you can take whatever car you want," Stumpy said.

I turned to Sin. "You take your car, I'll take Mom's. We can come to get mine later."

"Sounds good," he said, and we headed into the house.

The smell was still really strong but upstairs it wasn't so bad. I opened a couple of windows while I packed two duffel bags full of clothes and a couple of smaller ones with toiletries, books, laptops, charger cords and photos. I bagged up Mom and Dad's jewelry and their laptops and Mom's spell gear that she kept in a small chest in her room. It was a good thing I'd be using her car. Mine wouldn't fit half of this stuff.

Sin came down from the attic, a carved wooden box in his hands and a large canvas sack floating behind him.

"Careful," I hissed at him. "Danes in the house."

"Yeah, I know. But not up here. I did the 'hide me' spell on the trunk and slid it into the storage cupboard under the eaves, then buried it with a bunch of dusty stuff. No wards, don't worry."

"Okay, you do the float spell on everything but our duffel bags and I'll do the invisibility spell until we get them into the cars."

"I'm going to check my room first," Sin said and disappeared down the hall. I went around and closed up the windows and locked each room as I left. Anything to slow any nosy ones down.

Sin came out and we spelled the gear and headed down the back steps, making sure to keep the invisible bags between us. Once we got to Mom's SUV, I opened the back, dropped the seats and we started to load the stuff in, removing the spells once it was inside. Sin was smart enough to have grabbed a couple of comforters, so

we spread them out over the boxes and bags and then spread some of the car clutter on top of that.

I moved my car into the garage and locked it up, then got into the driver's seat of Mom's SUV and started it. Sin pulled something out of Dad's SUV and carried the duffel with him. The cops that had been parked behind me were idling in the street, so Sin got in with me and I backed out, stopping next to his car so he could get in. I followed him down the streets we'd grown up on, a feeling in my gut that this might be the last time I called this place home.

Chapter Two

Sin

I had to keep my anger in check. Sid needed me to stay calm and rational because of the two of us, I tended to be the less emotional one. She was holding on pretty damned well, considering – but if I started to show weakness, she'd try and be strong and hold everything in. We all know how bad holding it in is for a person. I'm in pre-med and it's something we've been taught. The whole 'physician heal thyself' mantra. I can go to the dojo and let it out. Sid? She'll just hold onto it until she explodes and then it's messy and sprayed all over everyone and everything.

No, really. Last time she lost it, she smashed three bottles of wine and threw the bucket of popcorn across the living room. Then she screamed so loud the neighbors called our parents to complain about the noise. That was about two years ago. Sid had been stressed and waiting to hear if she got into the pre-law program and I'd just found out I was accepted into the pre-med program. It was a perfect storm.

I hefted the last two bags and carried them into the cabin. Sid had lit a fire in the woodstove that was taking the damp feeling out of the place.

"Sid, I'm going to go to the grocery store. Is there anything special you want?"

"Yeah, make sure you get the good coffee? We're gonna need it," Sid replied. "And some fruit and stuff. I only see a few canned things in here from last fall. Do you need any cash?"

"No, I've got it. Just don't fall asleep. I'll need help carrying it all in and putting it away."

"I know. I'm going to scrub everything down, magic style."

"Okay, back in a few." I made sure her keys were on the hook by the door and headed out. There was a grocery a couple of miles further out that I planned on using, but first I had to stop at Benny's house and let the pack alpha know we were at the cabin. It wasn't necessarily a law, but it was considered good etiquette. Grandpa Boudreau taught us that it was easier to be polite and upfront than have to lie and hide.

I pulled up outside Benny's shop and saw the lights were still on inside, so headed there first. His engine repair business was in an old gas station garage with his house off the side behind it. Benny knew us and was cool with Sid and me, but not everyone around here felt the same. Prime example, Joey Garcia. "Hi Joey," I said as I walked past him and headed towards the office.

Joey made sniffing sound, then coughed. "Thought I smelled something rotten."

I smirked and shook my head. "Change your underwear more often."

He pushed off the wall and started towards me as I opened the office door. "Benny, it's Sin. You got a minute?" I called out, then let the door shut behind me – in Joey's face.

"Sinclair Boudreau, what brings you to this neck of the woods? You staying at your Grandpa's place?" Benny was about six feet tall, and about five foot wide. Not fat, no. The guy was solid muscle. Made sense that he preferred a bear's form when he shifted. Yes, I said preferred. Shifters could pick forms. There was usually one that was instinctive, the first one we turned into during puberty, but most of us had three or four we liked best.

"Hey, Benny," I shook his hand. "Yeah, Sid and I are at the cabin for a bit. I was just headed out to get some groceries but wanted to stop by and let you know we were here."

"Good man, Sin. Glad you've got your Grandpa's manners," Benny said, then turned and glared at Joey who stood staring through the office door window.

“Unlike some of the others around here.” Benny led me towards the desk and a couple of chairs then sat down. “I heard something, and I haven’t asked around yet. I was going to call your Grandpa and talk to him first, but since you’re here, I’ll ask you,” Benny said. “I heard something happened at your house, to your folks.”

“Yeah, something happened. They were taken,” I told him. “Lots of blood all around the house and a note stuck to the front door.”

“And what’s the SPD doing about it?”

I couldn’t hold back the snort of laughter. “Nothing. The SPD won’t take the case. We’re stuck with good old mundane BPD.”

Benny *growled* and every hair on my arms stood up. “The SPD won’t take the case? That’s because of you kids, isn’t it?”

“I’m guessing so, yeah. That, and they are still pissed my parents are together. Grandma Fortin used to call my father ‘that furball’ when she had a glass or two of wine. You’re one of the few that treats us like we’re worth the air we breathe.”

“What else can you tell me?”

I seriously considered telling Benny about us having to go to the park in about forty hours but I didn’t want a shifter versus witch war happening in the middle of town. I didn’t know if shifters or witches had taken my folks and if Benny was asking me, then it wasn’t shifters. “Not much. I’m hoping they’re still alive, but there was a lot of blood, Benny. Stumpy is on the case too.”

“Well, he might have zero ability as a shifter, but null or not, he’s one of us. He’ll call us in if he needs our help.”

“I’m hoping so,” I said, wondering if that was how Benny found out so much already.

“Go ahead and get your shopping done, Sin. I’ll have a couple of my boys keep an eye on the place while you’re there – from a distance, of course. I’m just worried about you kids and we take care of our own.”

“I appreciate it, Benny,” I said as I stood, and we gripped forearms before I turned to leave. I opened the door and Benny yelled out for Joey. I kept my ears tuned in and heard him start to rip into the dickhead before I got in my car. That put a smile on my face.

I probably spent way too long in the grocery store, but I was hungry, and I could be sure Sid needed to eat tonight, too. We’d grabbed drive-thru on the way here, but it wasn’t enough. I loaded us up for a few days just in case and headed back to the cabin. I spotted a fox near the driveway and waved. Candace preferred the fox form and I recognized the stripe pattern on her tail. That meant her husband, Stefano, was around in wolf form somewhere. They liked to work together on details, and I could feel the tension ease in my shoulders, knowing those two were out here. Candace and Stefano were friends of our parents and only a few years younger. Game nights out here when we would come on vacation always included them and some of their kids.

I pulled in and turned the car around so we could unload more easily. Knowing who was on guard duty meant we could use magic without worrying who saw us, so I just opened the trunk and grabbed a bag, then opened the back door. The rest of the groceries followed me up the steps, across the porch, and into the kitchen, floating about a foot above the ground. I had everything line up against the wall before I started putting stuff away.

“Sid, I’m back,” I yelled, hearing her walking around upstairs. I heard her race down the stairs and skid down the hall.

“Please tell me you got stuff we can eat tonight?” Sid said as she stopped in the doorway.

“Go light the grill and I’ll do these steaks. Oven fries to go with them sound good?”

“Oh gods, yes. I’ll help put stuff away once the grill is heated up,” Sid said as she headed out onto the porch. A nice gas grill sat under a cover and it wouldn’t take her long to get things going. I opened cabinets and the fridge and got stuff put away while the oven heated. My sis had done a great job of cleaning the place. Every surface gleamed and the faint hint of lemon barely tickled my nose. Yeah, we had to be careful what stuff we used. Shifter noses burned with some of the mundane favorite cleaning supplies.

About an hour later we had plates of food and a beer each at the table on the porch. It was a little chilly, but the cleaning smell still needed more airing out. “Candace and Stefano are walking the perimeter tonight. Benny sent them. He heard about Mom and Dad and was worried for us.”

“That’s sweet of him,” Sid said, half her steak already gone before she slowed down eating. “Thanks for doing the shopping.”

“Thanks for doing the cleaning,” I told her. “So, tonight we eat, drink and sleep. Tomorrow morning, we plan our next steps and see what we can learn?”

“Sounds good to me. My brain is numb, and I really needed food. I should know better than to burn up magic without enough fuel in me, but I did. Now I’m feeling it.”

We had both learned early that using magic was no different than using muscle. It burned calories and needed fuel as well as focus.

“Then eat up. I bought chocolate almond ice cream for dessert.”

Sid leaned over and kissed my cheek. “Best brother ever.”

* * *

The next morning, I made a scramble of leftover fries, eggs, bacon, and cheese. We sat at the table in the kitchen and inhaled coffee until our brains were sufficiently

lubricated. I refilled our mugs and leaned back. “Okay, so we’ve got until tomorrow at sunset. I’m sure it’s a trap, so we’ll need to figure out how we’re going to play it.”

“We need to make sure Stumpy doesn’t show up. Maybe we can get a few of Benny’s people to be around? They wouldn’t stand out. Not like cops would, anyway,” Sid said.

“What if it was shifters that took them?”

“And what if it were witches? I’ve been thinking about this and the one piece that makes absolutely no sense is the absence of the SPD. What if it were someone in the SPD that took them and is trying to start a war?”

“It wouldn’t be the first time they tried this if you believe Grandpa Boudreau’s stories.”

“Or what Grandma Fortin said about the witches, either.”

“So, what are we? The cause or the curse?” I asked.

“The cause of the curse, maybe?” Sid said.

“Ha ha, not funny. But I think you might be right with that. I think we should call Grandpa B. See what intel he might have.”

“You think he’d tell us anything he knows? You know how pissed he is that we went to a mundane college instead of the paranormal academy.”

“Yeah, I know he was pissed, but he was pretty generous at Christmas. He told us to look him up after finals to talk about what we wanted to do after graduation. I think he was hoping we’d go to PPA after college.” I told her.

“I’ll be honest, Sin. I thought about it. Even if I don’t ever serve in the SPD, I will at least understand what people are talking about at family gatherings, right?”

I laughed a bit. “Sometimes it’s a challenge to translate what they’re talking about. Let’s see what Grandpa says and what happens tomorrow.”

“Sure. You call him. He likes you better. You don’t have boobs,” Sid said and got to her feet, collecting our plates. “More coffee?”

I snorted into my coffee, choking a bit at Sid's comment. "I know, he has some misogynistic tendencies. Just take a deep breath and smile pretty?" I knew I deserved the swat with the dishtowel she gave me, but it was so worth it. "More coffee, please," I asked, nicely, as I pulled my cell out of my pocket. "Want me to call him on speaker?"

"Sure, don't tell him I'm listening, though. I'll just be quiet."

The phone rang three times and James Sinclair Boudreau, also known as Grandpa B, answered with a "Sin, mah boy, where the hell are ya? You and your sister somewhere safe?"

"Yes, Grandpa, we're safe. Up at your cabin, actually."

"Good. Benny called and told me you'd been by. I wasn't sure if you were still there."

"Yeah, we're both here. Our house is a crime scene," I told him.

He hesitated before a heavy sigh filled the space. "I heard about that, son. I've been doing some checking. Got a couple of my men going over the place and seeing what information they can get from BPD. Unofficially, of course, but I'm not going to let my son and daughter-in-law's disappearance go unsolved."

"Did you hear about the note on the door?" I asked.

Sid fidgeted, then left the room to get more coffee.

"I heard. You're not thinking of going, are you?"

"Of course, Grandpa. But not alone. Could we get some of your friends to be in the park and not look like they were on a stakeout or something? I'm also going to ask Benny to send a couple of shifters to back us up."

"Make sure he sends the smart ones. Not that idiot, Joey."

Sid snorted laughter from the kitchen, then turned on the water to muffle the noise.

"What was that noise, Sin?" Grandpa asked.

"Just Sid in the kitchen. She's washing up after breakfast," I told him.

"I'll be there tomorrow," Grandpa said.

"Uh.no Gramps. That's not a good idea. We have a theory…" I started.

"You have a theory. You and that sister of yours?"

"Hey, you don't have to say it like that." Sid yelled as she came into the dining room.

"I knew she was listening," Gramps said, chuckling.

"Quit acting like we're idiot toddlers, Grandpa B. You do realize we are both about to graduate summa cum laude, right?" Sid said.

"Okay, okay, both of you, relax. We're wondering if a shifter or a witch is behind this, trying to create another war. That's why we're asking you and we're going to ask Grandma Fortin to send a few of her best so we've covered both angles," I said.

There was silence for a few moments, then Grandpa spoke. "That's smart. Well, I'll send mine and you get Alicia to send hers and hopefully, we'll get your parents back safely tomorrow."

"Thanks, Grandpa," we both said, almost in unison.

"I love you two. We'll talk after this is all settled tomorrow, got me?"

"Got it, Grandpa," I said and disconnected the call.

"Gods, he is such a prick, but I love him anyway," Sid said as she got the pot of coffee and refilled our mugs.

I drank some coffee while Sid cut up some fruit and set it on a plate for us.

"Want me to talk to Benny?" Sid asked around a mouthful of grapes.

"No, I'll take Benny. You take Grandma Fortin."

"Ugh, thanks *so* much for that."

"Hey, I take the ones that like me, and you get the one that loves you best."

Sid lifted her mug and toasted me. "Plans are made. We'll get Mom and Dad back. We'll get our lives back. We'll get to go home, and I'll go to law school and you'll go to med school and it'll all be good."

Yeah, something had me thinking that a whole lot of that statement was wishful thinking.

Chapter Three

Sid

We cleaned up the cabin, not even sure if we were going to be staying here tonight or just coming back to pack up the perishables and head home. I made sure all my clothes were back in the bag and checked that the gear we'd pulled out of the house was stored in the safe. Yes, this cabin had a safe. Grandpa had built a ten by ten foot trap door cellar room that was accessed through the floor in the linen closet. I wanted my silver dagger and it was in the bag of stuff I'd put down in the safe. I climbed down the ladder, headed over to the row of bags, and started digging through to find where I'd stuffed it in the rush to get out of the house. It was stuck inside one of my sneakers, so I pulled it out, then tucked it in the back of my jeans. As I zipped the bag shut, I saw the bag that Sin had pulled out of Dad's car. I went to pull it closer and failed, so I just pulled it open and almost fell over.

"Sinclair Boudreau, get your ass down here," I yelled as I stared at a bag full of weapons. Guns, swords, daggers, and what looked like a taser or two.

Sin slid down the ladder and grinned. "I see you found our *backup* backup."

"What the everlovin' fuck? Dad had these in his car?"

"Yeah, we used some of them out at the range last weekend. Didn't think the cops needed to find them and I knew where Dad had stashed them in a hidden compartment under the back seat."

"But the cops searched Mom and Dad's cars."

"The BPD searched. They did a quick look through and moved on. It was pretty clear our parents were the victims and the cars hadn't been used in the commission

of the crime. No need for a deep dive."

"Oh, right. The BPD searched. I forgot." Sarcasm dripped from my words. "Anyway, why the armory? I thought the folks considered weapons the last gasp after everything else was tried?"

"We don't know what we're dealing with. If it's witches, shifters, both, neither… who can tell?"

"So, a gun and a blade just in case?" I clarified.

"Yeah, silver blade, silver bullets. They'll work against both. Shifters with silver, of course, and blades and bullets hurt witches whether silver or steel."

"Okay. I've got my silver dagger already. I'll take a Glock 9mm." Sin handed me the gun, three clips and a box of ammo. He pulled out a 45, three clips, ammo, and a throwing ax. We both headed up the ladder and I left it to Sin to lock the door behind us while I sat on the couch and loaded up the clips. It had started to get to me. We didn't know if our parents were alive or dead, or who had taken them and wanted us. We were loading up to go after our own kind and it, honestly, had me sick to my stomach.

"Stumpy has left three voicemails on my phone. Has he called you?"

Sin looked up from loading his clips. "Yeah, I talked to him about an hour ago. He said Benny had asked him about cleaning up the house before we went home. They sent a cleaning crew over this morning."

"That was nice of them. I wasn't looking forward to cleaning that up." I hadn't thought of it much, to be blunt. It was way down the list of things on my mind. "Did they say anything about the case?"

"No news, no leads, nothing," Sin said.

"Figures." I could feel the anger rising. Not having the SPD on the case was an insult and meant the best paranormal officers were being kept away. "When I talked to Grandma Fortin, she said Aunt Cosette had taken some of her best students to the house to see what they could find. They found both shifter and witch traces, but

couldn't tell if they were from us, our folks, or some strangers. With all of the BPD traffic, it muddied any clues."

"So we still don't know anything. I guess we just have to go to the park tonight and hope Mom and Dad are okay, and that our friends can help us take down whoever took them." Sin snapped a clip into his gun, slid one into the chamber and flipped the safety on. "One way or another, we'll get answers tonight."

I did the same with my gun and clipped the holster to my belt, snapping the extra clips into belt holders. Our jackets would cover the weapons and clips. The treated leather would help hide the smell of gunpowder and silver. "Does any of this make sense to you? The children of Belle Cove Academy's two founding families – kidnapped – and the SPD refusing to do something about it?"

Sin got to his feet and went to the window to stare out at the lake in the late spring sunshine. "No, none of it makes any sense. Why Mom and Dad? Sure, they were both cops for a while, then Dad went into teaching and Mom started her herbal business when we came along. They're not outspoken members of the community – in fact, they do their best to stay under the radar. Don't want to rub the whole 'not supposed to be' witch with a shifter thing in people's faces. They're not even the only shifter/witch couple out there."

"Just the only one to have living children," I reminded him.

"Right, I forgot that. Wasn't there another couple up here in Syren Lake that had a baby?"

"Yeah, and it died within a month. Most of the moms miscarry, but some come to term and die within the first couple of months."

"So, there's something incompatible in the genetics?"

"You're the pre-med, not me. I have no clue. Makes me wonder why we survived. Maybe something to do with us being twins," I told him.

"Maybe. With two of us, the power could balance better? I'd love to do some genetic research on it. Someday," Sin said. He got that lost in his thoughts look that

usually ended up with ten notebooks full of ideas and three days of no contact.

"Sin, you can worry about that tomorrow, okay? Right now, we have to focus on this mess."

A deep breath and a shake of his head had Sin refocused. "Right, you're right. We should get going, so we can be at the park when the backup starts showing up."

We headed out to Sin's car, the cabin locked up tight. Together, we cast a ward around the house to protect it and alert us if trespassed.

The ride to the park was mostly quiet, with a stop for burgers and coffee that we'd eat when we got there. Within an hour, we were sitting on a bench near the pond in the center of the park. I tried to choke down my burger, knowing I'd need the fuel but not really wanting to eat. I tossed the last bits of the bun onto the grass for birds to enjoy, licked the ketchup off my fingers and wrapped them around my cup of coffee.

"What if whoever it is shows up without Mom and Dad?"

Sin kept his gaze on the comings and goings around us as he answered. "Then we grab them and make them tell us where they are."

His leg kept bouncing, so I reached over and rested a hand on his knee. "Not alone, Sin. Never alone."

"Never alone," he replied and looked at me, voice dropped to a faint whisper. "Benny and friends are here. Auntie and some of hers are mixed in."

A glance at my phone showed two minutes to sunset, so I pushed to my feet and grabbed our trash. "Let's get in place."

I pulled on fingerless leather gloves, tugged my jacket down in the back and sat on the edge of the fountain. Sin stood beside me, fingertips tucked in the tops of the front pockets on his jeans. I'd braided my hair back out of the way and couldn't stop playing with the end of the braid. It was my tell, like Sin's was his jiggling leg or tapping foot. Once I realized I was doing it, I stopped – then reached out to lightly squeeze Sin's knee.

“Anyone watching will know we’re nervous if they know anything about us. Stop jiggling and nudge me if I play with my hair, okay?”

“Yeah, good point.” He leaned into the fountain a bit more to keep from wiggling.

We shared the same hair, thick and dark brown to nearly black. His curled a bit where he kept it short, mine hung to my hips when it wasn’t braided. We shared the same hazel eye color that went from blue to green, depending on our moods or what we were wearing. Light tan skin, even in mid-winter, spoke to our Cajun/Acadian ancestry and gave us a slightly exotic look. We had both been offered modeling gigs when we were little and our parents, thank gods, turned them down.

The sun slid down past the horizon, the late spring light glowed peach into orange as we waited. And waited. And waited. Both Sin and I kept our gaze on the people roaming in and out of the park. We both saw shifter and witch friends, as well as a few family members. I felt the assurance that no matter what happened, we were covered.

An hour past nightfall and Auntie Sett came over and sat beside me. Her favorite worn leather jacket’s buckles jingled as she nudged me with her elbow. “I think y’all got stood up.” She slid her arm around my shoulders and snuggled me close. “Come on, darlin’. Let’s get you and your brother out of here.”

Sin turned and headed for the car without saying a word. I saw him stop near Benny’s truck and talk for a moment before he got into his car and started it up. I hugged my aunt. “Thank you, Auntie Sett, for coming and bringing people. If you guys hear anything…”

“Of course, darlin’. Call me if you need anything. Anything at all,” she said.

I slid into the passenger’s seat, shut the door and reached for the seat belt as Sin pulled away.

"Talk to me," I asked.

"I don't want to."

"Sin…"

"Sid…"

I sighed. "Come on. We knew there was a chance this was a setup."

"I know. I was just hoping…"

My phone rang. I saw it was Grandpa B's number, so I answered with a "Hey, Grandpa, how're they hangin'?"

"Girl, you're going to get yourself in trouble with that mouth of yours. Put me on speaker."

I could hear something weird in his voice, so I hit the speaker button. "Okay, Grandpa, you're on speaker."

"You guys headed back to the cabin?"

"Yes, Grandpa," Sin said. "Why?"

"Call me when you get to the cabin. Promise?"

"Yeah, Grandpa, we promise," I said. "What's going on? You sound…weird."

"Just a little frustrated that your parents didn't get returned to us tonight. Call me when you get to the cabin and don't stop anywhere on the way. Love you two." He disconnected the call and I was left with a bad feeling.

"What do you think that's all about?" I asked Sin.

His hands tightened on the wheel before he answered. "I have no clue, but you're right, he sounded off."

We pulled up to the cabin, the wards still intact. I slipped through them to unlock the door while Sin did his walk around. He liked to check the outbuildings and property boundaries now and then like Grandpa did when he stayed here. I got the oven going and pulled out a lasagna that Maria, Benny's wife, had sent over. With that in the oven, I prepped garlic bread and opened a bottle of wine. Sin came in

through the back and I turned to hand him a glass of wine before I saw his face. Something really bad had happened.

"Tell me," I said as he took the wine glass.

"I called Grandpa while I walked the property. Sid, the house. It's gone."

"What do you mean, the house is gone?"

"While we were at the park, someone burned our house down."

I blinked at him while I processed the news, then drained my wine glass before I turned to put the garlic bread into the oven.

"They made sure we were out of the way so they could do that, didn't they?"

"It seems that way," Sin said. "And no, there were no bodies found in the ashes. Our folks are still out there, somewhere."

"We need to go and see if the chest survived." I thought about the one that we'd hidden in the wall. We'd warded it well, but who knew if the wards would protect it from fire.

"It'll be crawling with uniforms right now. Grandpa said he was on the scene and would retrieve whatever he could. I'm just glad you were so thorough with bringing the more fragile stuff with us. We could have lost so much more."

"Call Grandpa back and tell him to look for the trunk?"

"Sure, and you want to rescue dinner?" He smirked at me as he headed into the living room with the phone. I turned to pull the slightly well-done garlic bread out of the oven, then the lasagna. My great-grandmother witch on Mom's side had had the gift of precognition. Guess I'd inherited a touch of that, because of that feeling I'd had when we drove away, somehow knowing it was the last time I'd see the house. Maybe that's why I wasn't freaking out right now.

I dished up the food and set the plates on the island. Wine, silverware, napkins and a basket of the very toasted garlic bread were put out before Sin came back into the room. "He said he had one of the firemen clear a path and he got the chest. The

garage was saved, so your car and Dad's are still okay. We can go clear that out later this week."

We sat down to eat, but I just stared at my plate. "Now what do we do?"

"Grandpa said we can call this place home for as long as we want to. He's also transferred some money into our accounts so we can get more clothes and stuff."

I picked up my fork and poked at the food. "Did he say anything else?"

Sin ate a couple of bites of lasagna before he answered me. "Yeah, he did. He said if we waited to go to med school and law school and got through training at the Academy, he'd pay for grad school. Full ride. And he'd pay for a house or condo or whatever we wanted near our grad schools."

I pushed my plate away and refilled our wine glasses. "Well, fuck."

"Eat, Sid. You used a lot of energy today, with wards and all that. We've got to stay juiced up in case anything happens, sis."

He was always good at taking care of me. I pulled my plate close again and took a couple of bites. "When do we have to give him an answer?"

"Six weeks. That way we have time to register and everything for the new class at PPA."

"And the time to try and figure out what the hell happened to Mom and Dad."

He got up to put his dishes in the dishwasher and I dumped the last of the wine bottle into the glasses. I'd managed to eat about half of my dinner, but I couldn't choke any more down. It looked like this was going to be a two bottle night.

Sin slid a slice of garlic bread on a napkin over in front of me. "Eat this and I'll open the Riesling."

I took a bite and sighed. "It tastes good. At least I did something right tonight."

"Oh, knock it the hell off, sis. Emo Sid was interesting when you were thirteen. Not so attractive now."

"I think I've got every right to be emo after today," I whined, taking a swallow of wine to shut my mouth for a minute. A breath and I mumbled, "I just miss Mom."

Sin sighed and reached out to grip my shoulder. “I know. I miss them too.”

“Let’s go see Grandpa tomorrow and get the chest.”

“Sounds like a plan. I’ll open the wine, you go find us a movie or something to watch, okay? Get our minds off of stuff for a bit.”

I slid off the stool and took my glass into the living room. A pair of leather recliners sat on either side of a table, a matching sofa under the window and a bookshelf on the other wall. The wall facing the recliners held a fireplace with a wood stove insert and over the mantle was a huge flat-screen TV. I brought up the streaming service and found a John Wick movie we’d only seen twice.

“Good choice,” Sin said as he sat the wine bottle down between us, taking the other recliner. “Let it go, for now, Sid.”

I poured more wine and took his advice.

Chapter Four

Sin

I'd become too used to worrying about Sid these days. I realized this as I drove us back through the city to Grandpa's house on the other side of Belle Cove. "You okay, sis?"

"Oh, my gods, Sin, stop asking me that, please," Sid said as she thumped her head back against the headrest.

"Look, I know the last thing you want to do is visit Grandpa, but.."

"Whatever gave you that idea? The fact that he always treats me as a second-class citizen and barely acknowledges the fact that I'm a breathing human being? Never mind that I'm his actual granddaughter."

"And what about Grandma Fortin? She would say 'warlock' like it's a curse every time she saw me. Like it's my fault I'm both male *and* a witch. No one even uses the term warlock because it means traitor, not male witch," I reminded her.

"So, we both have grandparents that make us want to scream, punch them, or blow up something in their general vicinity. Yay us." Sid said.

"And after we visit Grandpa, we should probably go visit Grandma Fortin. See if she's heard anything. You know she won't call us to give us intel and will make us go in person."

Sid snorted laughter into her travel mug. "Careful, Sin. Your snark is showing."

It felt good to hear her laugh. We'd not had much reason to over the past few days. After the park fiasco and the house burning down, we tried to go see the house and got turned away. Grandpa paid some folks to empty the garage and move

the vehicles and the stuff into a storage shed at the cabin, and the debris was getting hauled away and the site cleared. Going through the things stored in the garage had been harder than we'd expected. Realizing a whole lifetime's worth of photos and memories had gone up in smoke, along with family heirloom furniture pieces, Mom's wedding dress, Dad's favorite fishing hat, all of it gone.

We made our way out the other side of the city and down the cliff road. A twisting road ran from the city to the lighthouse on the peninsula. About a hundred feet below, the ocean crashed against the rocks, sending spray into the air. I glanced over and saw Sid staring out the window, watching the waves. "That view is the best part of this ride, isn't it?"

"Yeah, it's the best part of visits to Grandpa's place. I always like it best from the other direction, though."

"Ha. Ha. Okay, suck it up, sweet cheeks. We're about to face the dragon in his castle." I knew that would get a laugh out of her and I wasn't disappointed. I pulled up to the gates, punched in the code, and drove us up to the house a couple of minutes later. The Boudreau mansion sat on several acres of prime waterfront property with the house at the top of the hill to best capture the views of the ocean. The main part was a three-story square in the brick Georgian style, built in 1702, with wings added on to either side in the late 1780s and a back addition of a Victorian conservatory using steel in the late 1800s. We had been raised knowing the history of the house as much as knowing the history of the family that built it and still lived in it. Our father's family, a long and proud line of shifters.

I got out of the car and stretched, doing my best to give Sid a few moments to prepare herself. I loved my Grandpa, but he was a real dick when it came to the way he treated my sister.

By the time I got around the car, Sid was standing outside it, tugging on her clothes and twisting her hair around a finger. I gave her a shoulder hug and kissed the top of her head. "Just breathe, Sid. We'll get out of here as soon as we can, okay?"

"I'm gonna hold you to that," she said as she forced a smile to her lips and walked up the steps with me.

I pushed the front door open and called out. "Grandpa, we're here."

His responding bellow came from the back of the house, which meant he was in his library. "Back here, my boy."

We walked past the central staircase down a hall lined with antique portraits of ancestors. Mahogany floors covered with imported, antique carpets muffled our steps as I led the way to the library. Sid slowed her steps the closer we got until I reached back and took her hand. I gave her the 'knock it off' look and she stuck her tongue out at me. Yeah, we were that mature.

I tugged Sid's hand to pull her closer. "Behave." I hissed, then nudged her into place beside me. We walked into the library side by side.

"A pleasure to see you, Sinclair." Grandpa B said from his seat behind his desk. "Oh, and hello, Sidonie."

"Grandfather Boudreau," Sid said, staying by the door.

I moved to the two chairs in front of his desk and dropped into one, eyes on my grandfather as he stared at my sister.

"Are you going to come join us, Sidonie?" he asked.

"It's Sid, Grandpa. And I'll come join you if you *really* want me to, otherwise, I can go find something else to do and leave you here with your favorite grandchild."

I grinned at Grandpa, knowing her attitude was one of the things he admired most about her, but would never tell her as much.

"Come sit, Sid. Please," he said.

That had me sitting up and staring at him. "Okay, Grandpa. What's going on?"

Sid walked over and sat, giving him the same worried look I was wearing.

"We found your mother."

My heart stuttered. I felt it skip in my chest. "Is she alive?"

"Where did you find her?" Sid asked.

“Yes, she is alive, and two of my men found her at the lighthouse. Someone had left a cryptic message tied to the gate with some of her hair. She’s at Alicia’s house right now, being seen by the healers.”

Sid and I both got to our feet, ready to head out right then when Grandpa spoke again. “Wait, you two. Please, sit for a few more minutes.”

“But, Grandpa,” Sid started to argue.

“Please,” he said again.

We both sat down on the edge of our seats. Sid was twisting her hair into a knot and my knee was bouncing so fast, my calf was cramping.

“Your mother said they still had your father. It’s some organization calling itself The Purist League. They want to eliminate all impure shifters and witches from existence.”

“That’s why they wanted to exchange them for us,” I said. “So they could kill us?”

“However, we have since learned that your father escaped, and they tracked him back to your house. They burned it down, thinking he was trapped inside. He wasn’t. We don’t know where your father is right now, and your mother was injured trying to escape with him. They didn’t want her death on their hands, so they dumped her at the lighthouse and left us a message. I guess they’re more afraid of the Fortin family than they are of the Boudreaus.” He got to his feet, fists resting on his desk as he leaned forward. “I think it’s time they learned to fear both families. Don’t you?”

All I could think about was Mom, hurt and Dad, somewhere out there with these Purist idiots hunting him. Luckily Sid had more clarity.

“Fear? No, Grandpa. Fear isn’t going to work with people calling themselves Purists. They’re acting out of fear. Fear that something different, something like Sin and I, are going to change how they live their lives, how they exist in the world. We don’t need to make them fear us. We need to get them to understand and accept us.”

He gave a derisive snort and shook his head. “Damned fool girl child. Your brother certainly got all of the brains in that birthing. Why don’t you just go to the kitchen and get us some drinks while your brother and I handle things?”

Sid got to her feet, grabbed a crystal vase off the desk and lifted it over her head. I grabbed it before she could throw it, set it on the desk and faced our grandfather.

“With all due respect, sir, shut your fucking mouth. You *ever* speak to Sid like that again and it will be the last time you speak with either of us. Understood?” I had to breathe a couple of deep ones after that because I could feel the growl deep in my chest. “We are a package deal. We work best together, and we have each other’s back, no matter what. You have a problem with that, you’re the one who didn’t get the brains.”

Our grandfather’s face was bright red and he was spluttering, so I took Sid’s hand and led her to the door.

“Thanks for that,” she whispered to me. I squeezed her hand in reply.

We got just outside the library door when we heard a choking sound and the creak of Grandpa’s chair. Sid whirled around and ran to his side. “Grandpa, are you alright? Can you breathe?”

I saw him slumped in his chair, hands over his face, making this wheezing sound as he shook. “Grandpa?” I asked as I walked closer.

He sniffled and rubbed his face, then pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket and wiped at his eyes, then nose. “I’m sorry,” he finally wheezed out.

Sid sighed, walked around his desk and sat back down. I just stood there, arm on the back of the leather wingback I had been sitting in earlier. “Sorry for what?”

“For being such a horses ass. I know better, but my worry for your father – my boy – has me leaning more towards my animal side than my human.”

“And so you’ve been more animal than human every time you see me?” Sid said.

“She has a point, Grandpa.”

The old man leaned back and sighed. “Do you know how many twins were born into this family? Five. Over the last hundred years. Every pair of twins were both males.” He shook his head. “Your father not only gave me mutant grandchildren, he couldn’t even give me both males. Total waste of his genetics.”

“Are you freakin’ kidding me right now?” I said, staring at the man I had admired and loved. Sid had a much different reaction. Standing, she moved past the desk to the bookshelves at the end of the room. She reached up, tugged on the copy of Jack London’s “Call of the Wild” and the bookcase slid to the right, revealing the safe.

“What do you think…” Grandpa started to say, and I turned to face him.

“I think you need to be quiet,” I said.

“You children need to stop.” He started to get up out of his chair and Sid turned, flicked her hand in his direction, and a force spell slapped him in the chest and pushed him back into his chair.

I snorted a rude laugh and shook my head. “Like I said, be quiet and just sit there. It’s healthier for you.”

Sid opened the safe, stepped inside and within a few minutes, she was walking out with our wooden trunk floating behind her. “It’s still warded,” she told me.

“Good,” I turned to our grandfather. “Now, the bank account information.”

“I’m not about to give…”

“Yeah, yeah, we know. You’re not about to give a damn about us because we’re mutants. But you *are* about to give us the account information for those trusts you set up for us instead of using them as threats to hold over us. We’re past legal age, more than capable of handling our own finances, and not interested in having to deal with you again.”

He got to his feet and went into the safe. A few minutes went by and he came out with a soft black leather bag zipped shut. He handed it to me, so I zipped it

open. Inside were two account access packets and a couple of bound bundles of money. I zipped it shut and nodded to Sid. “We’re done.”

Sid headed out of the office, the trunk floating behind her. I started to follow, then stopped and reached into my pocket. I pulled out the two keys for the house that he’d given me a couple of years back and tossed them onto his desk, then followed my sister out to the car.

Our grandfather didn’t say a word. I mean, what could he say?

* * *

Once we were back on the road, I turned toward the lighthouse.

“Thanks,” Sid said. “I want to go see if there are any traces there, too.”

“Then we go to Grandma’s place and see Mom.”

“Definitely. I need to see that she’s okay.”

It was only about ten minutes up the road from Boudreau House to the lighthouse on the point. No one was there that we could see. No cars and no hikers as we parked and made our way up to the house and tower. There was a new padlock on the lighthouse door, but a whispered word of power and the lock popped open. Inside the ground floor of the tower, a dirty blanket lay on the floor. Bloodstains marred the plaid fabric and the scent of blood and salt was in the air. Sid picked up a broken branch from some debris in the corner and lifted the blanket, revealing a salt circle underneath.

I wandered the room and found herb bundles scattered in the dead leaves and brush. “Whoever brought Mom here, tried to heal and protect her. I guess that’s a good sign?” I said.

“There’s a lot of blood on this blanket. You got a trash bag in the car? I don’t want to leave Mom’s blood here for someone to maybe use.” Sid said.

“I’ve got a better idea,” I told her. With a gesture and a word of power, some of the brush and leaves swirled into the empty fireplace.

Sid kept the blanket on the stick and brought it over, stuffing it into the pile. She checked to make sure the flue was open, and I lit the fire with my magic. It didn’t take long to turn the blanket into ash. Sid and I stood there, watching until it was gone. I put the fire out and we left.

It was time to go to the Fortin side of town and see Mom.

Chapter Five

Sid

Sin pulled up the gravel drive between the gardens and past the cottage herbal shop. We drove past Auntie Sett's little blue cottage covered in ivy and morning glory vines, past the pale green cottage that used to be our Mom's before she got married and parked in front of the main farmhouse. A Victorian in a soft yellow with blue and green trim and gingerbread detailing sprawled amid flowers and herbs. Hanging pots of ferns and flowers decorated the wrap around porch, shading the padded wicker seats. The differences between the Boudreau home base and the Fortin home base were stark.

I got out the minute the car stopped but Sin called me back.

"Sid, wait a sec. Come sit back down a moment."

I slid back into the car and looked up at him. "What's up?"

"We need to ward this, and the car, before we go in," Sin said.

"Oh, yeah. Let's make it fast. I want to see Mom." We got it done quickly and slid the bag into the glove compartment, got out, sealed the wards, then headed inside. When I got to the door, Auntie Sett pulled it open and tugged me into a hug.

"She's better. She's going to be okay," Auntie Sett's voice cracked, and I hugged her back good and tight. Mom was the older of the two sisters. There had been four of them, the Fortin sisters, but the two eldest had died in the last shifter-witch war. Bernadette and Marie-Sidonie were about two years apart, then twelve years between Marie and my mom, and three years between Mom and Cosette. Auntie Sett barely remembered Bernie and Marie. They'd died when she had been five

years old. Grandma had checked out for a few years after losing two of her kids, so Mom had helped raise Sett until Grandma got her head screwed back on straight.

"She's tough, Auntie Sett. She's not going to let some racist asshat take her out," I said. My attempt at reassurance. Hey, I was pre-law, not in law school yet. The art of subtlety had never been mine.

Sin rolled his eyes at me and nudged us both back into the house, a hand on Auntie's shoulder. "Who's her healer?" he asked.

"Evelyn Rue," Sett told him, an arm looped around my waist as we headed down the hall to the kitchen. "I was just getting tea ready to bring in. You go ahead, Sid. I want to ask Sin's advice on some of the herbs. He's better at them than I am."

I kissed Sett's cheek and slipped past them to the hallway. I knew Mom would be in the sick room in the back. It was a bright and airy guest room with its own bath, a door out to the patio, and across the hall from the apothecary room. The door was open, and I gently tapped before I pushed it open a bit more. "May I?" I asked as I stepped a pace in.

"Siddie," my Mom said, lifting a hand to me.

I glanced at my grandmother for a moment and she nodded, so I rushed over to the bed and knelt beside it. I took Mom's hand and kissed her fingers. "I'm *so* glad to see you."

"I'm pretty glad to see you too, daughter mine," Mom tugged my hand a little and I leaned up and kissed her forehead.

"How are you feeling? Sin and I went to the lighthouse and burned the bloody blanket. Didn't want to leave that around for anyone to use."

"Smart girl," she murmured as she stroked my hair. "I'm feeling a lot better, but I'm going to need some time to get my strength back."

Evelyn cleared her throat, "As soon as Cosette brings the tea and Amelia drinks it, she needs to rest."

Grandma Fortin moved to the bed, leaned over and kissed Mom's forehead. "I'm going to talk to the kids, Melly. You drink your tea and rest. They'll be here when you wake up."

I kissed Mom again and got to my feet. "Definitely, Mom."

Sin came in with Sett and he carried the tray for her to put it on a table before he headed over to Mom. "Hey beautiful mother of mine," he said as he leaned over to kiss her forehead.

"There's my Sinclair. Hello, son. You and your sister are the lights of my life."

"And you are the light of ours, Mom," Sin said as he handed her a cup of tea and helped her sip it.

Evelyn took the cup from Sin and sat beside Mom to help her drink the tea.

"We'll see you after your rest, Mom," I told her and headed for the door.

Grandma walked out with us and we hugged. "I'm glad you two came here. You'll stay for the night, so you can spend time with your mom?"

"Sure, Grandma. Thanks for asking," Sin said.

"We'd like to stay, Grandma. It's been a really crappy day," I told her.

Gleaming silver hair coiled in a braid around her head, Grandma Fortin was a tiny powerhouse. Elegant demeanor and fine manners in cargo pants, chamois shirt and a t-shirt with a broom on it that said: "I Drive Stick".

"Well, come into the kitchen. There's a big pot of chicken soup on the stove and Sett made her cheddar herb bread."

"Oh, bless you both. I'm starved," Sin said as he moved to kiss the top of Grandma's head.

We all sat down at the table and Jolie, Bernadette's daughter, put the food on the table. Jolie's father had sent her to Grandma when she was thirteen and started showing her magic. She'd lived here, worked with Grandma on the farm and helped around the house since then.

"Hi, Jolie, how are you?" Sin asked as she set a pitcher of iced tea on the table.

“Good,” Jolie said, tone short and cold. She went back into the kitchen and left us alone.

Grandma sighed. “I’m sorry about that. You’d think she’d have learned by now.”

I put my hand over hers and squeezed lightly. “It’s fine, Grandma. We’re used to it.”

“You shouldn’t have to be. You two didn’t ask to be born special and your parents fell in love in spite of it all. A person can’t choose who their heart picks.”

I thought about her words while I ate my soup with the bread. Mom had told me when I was younger that she and Dad had met while he was on an investigation. They’d been friends for a couple of years before they realized they wanted more than friendship. Both had dated other people but couldn’t get each other out of their heads so they ended up together and were happier that way. Sin and I had only dated humans so far, trying to play it safe. The last thing we wanted was to upset one side or the other by dating a gifted one.

Sin’s spoon rested in his empty bowl as he reached for more bread. “Grandma, did Mom say anything about Dad?”

“She only said that they were split up after the first two days and she didn’t see him again.”

“Our grandfather Boudreau said that Dad escaped and had gone back to the house. They burned it down, hoping to get him, but no bodies were found in the rubble, so he’s still out there, somewhere,” I told her.

Grandma’s expression tightened, “Do you believe him?”

I shared a look with Sin, and he answered. “We believe him about that, at least. But we won’t be voluntarily socializing with him again. Not after today.”

“I won’t ask what he did this time,” Grandma said. “He’s always been a racist, misogynistic asshole, so I’m assuming it was something along those lines.”

“You called it,” I said.

“I do feel for him in that his child is missing. I’m grateful mine is alive and back with us, so I can give him that much. But if he treated you poorly, Siddie, then that’s all he gets. My sympathies for his worry over his child and nothing more.” Grandma reached over and poured us more tea before she continued. “He spoke down to your mother once, in front of me, and I gave him a case of hives that made his life interesting for a little while.”

“Grandma,” I gasped, then burst into laughter.

Sin choked on his mouthful of tea, trying not to spray it as he laughed.

Grandma shrugged. “Well, men tend to like to scratch their privates a lot. I just gave him a reason to be doing it.”

It felt good to laugh with Sin and Grandma like this. We’d not had a lot to laugh about the past few days. Knowing Mom would be okay was a huge help too. Now we just needed to find Dad.

“Sin, could you call Benny and tell him about Dad? Maybe they could keep an eye out for him. We know he liked to run the woods around the lake.”

“Sure, sis. I’ll take care of that. Let me go do it now,” Sin said as he got up and put his dishes in the kitchen.

Grandma reached out and tucked a strand of my hair behind my ear. “You two are doing well through all of this. I’m proud of you, Siddie.”

“Thanks, Grandma. I’m just trying to do my best, is all. Most of our friends are planning for graduation and we’re trying to keep our parents alive.”

“I know this has been a sore subject before, but have you considered getting more training?”

I sighed. “We’ve been talking about it. I still want to go to law school and Sin wants medical school, but if there’s another war coming, we need to be better prepared.”

“I pray to all the Powers That Be that there will not be another war, but I, too, am seeing the signs of unrest. I think being better trained would help you two stay

alive longer. You know I'm a blunt speaker and having you two as targets isn't going to change."

"I know. This mess with Mom and Dad is just the worst we've had to deal with so far."

"Just think about it, Siddie. I'll support you no matter what your decision. You and Sin are smart kids and will make good decisions about this." Grandma gave me a kiss on my forehead, and it felt like a benediction.

Sin jogged back into the room, "Sid, we've gotta go. Benny said someone tried to get to the cabin and Stefano got hurt."

"It never triggered the wards," I said, trying to understand what he was saying.

"They never got that close. Candace and Stefano were on patrol and caught them before they got into the yard." He paused and looked at Grandma. "They were witches, Grandma. Can Auntie Sett come to help us?"

Grandma nodded. "I'll get her. We'll also get your things. You two can live in your Mom's cottage for now."

"Wait, Grandma…" I started to say and Sin shook his head.

"No, Sid, she's right. Who knows what crap Grandpa will pull now that we're standing up for ourselves. I'll ask Benny if we can get a couple of guys and a trailer to move the garage stuff. You focus on the house stuff. But for now, let's get over there and make sure Stefano is okay and find out what happened."

Grandma left the room while we got cleaned up and ready to go. Before we left, she handed me a set of keys. "These go to the cottage. The others are to the storage barn out back. You can put stuff in there. It's climate-controlled for the herb packages."

"Thank you, Grandma. Let Mom know we'll be back if she wakes up?" I asked.

"Sure, honey. You two get a move on. It'll be dark soon."

* * *

We pulled up to Benny's garage first, to check on Candace and Stefano. Out behind the garage was a small clinic that he used for the pack when needed. There were a couple of vehicles outside the clinic, so we pulled up there.

"Sin, do you think we should stay at the cabin or go to Grams?"

"Go to Grams. We have the finances now, and let's be honest, the wards at Grandma's place are better than anything we could put up."

"True, because they've been built on for generations. Hundreds of years."

"Do you want to stay here and just let me go in?" Sin asked me, expression worried.

I shook my head. "No, I'll go with you. I need to get past this block of mine sooner rather than later."

We got out of the car and headed to the clinic. A pack member stood by the door inside and nodded to us when we went in. I took a deep breath and all I could smell were shifters and blood. My hands started to shake so I shoved them in my jacket pockets and followed Sin into the next room.

Stefano lay on a table with the doctor standing over him, checking an IV that fed into the patient's arm. Candace was seated beside the table, holding her husband's hand.

Benny came up to us as we stepped into the room and urged us back out. "Hey, you two, he's going to be okay. Whatever the witch did to him, it forced him out of his shift and knocked him unconscious. I've never seen anything like it."

"Hey, Benny. Glad to hear he's going to recover. Our Aunt Cosette is coming by to help if you need it. She is going to stay out in the car until you say it's okay. We don't want to step on any toes," Sin said.

"She might be able to ease whatever aftereffects the spell attack left behind and make sure there aren't any nasty surprises that pop up later," I told him.

“Geeze, I didn’t think about that. You two and your Mama are the only witches I ever got to know. Is your Aunt cool like you?” Benny asked.

I laughed a bit. “Auntie Sett is the coolest person ever. We wouldn’t have brought her along if she wasn’t, Benny.”

Sin looked at his phone. “She’s parked outside. Want her to come in?”

“Let me go check with the doctor and Candace,” Benny said. He disappeared back into the clinic while Sin texted Sett.

I leaned against the wall, practicing my breathing. I had to stay calm. See, Sin was pretty comfortable with his shifter side. He’d been training with Grandpa B for years, but I had to work with what Sin remembered, and then eventually, with Dad. Dad had worked so much, he wasn’t around enough to train us when we were small – and he thought Grandpa was training us both. Yeah, not so much. When I hit puberty and the urge to shift got to be too much, I did it alone, in the garage. It was traumatic and when I shifted back, I refused to shift again, until it got to be too much. We were supposed to shift a couple of times a month, at a minimum. Something about the balance of our human and animal sides. It wasn’t a moon thing, more of a yin-yang thing. I still hated shifting. Being around more than one or two shifters made it hard for me to control the urge to shift, so I spent more time with the witch side of the family or just mundanes.

That’s why Sin was worried about me being here, around a bunch of shifters in a heightened emotional state. More pheromones in the air meant more stress on my ability to control my shift.

Benny came out and nodded to Sin. “Go get your aunt. The doctor can’t figure out why Stefano isn’t waking up yet and Candace said she trusts you and your family.”

I held my hand up. “I’ll get her, be right back.” Fresh air. I needed it. I darted out the door, over to Auntie Sett’s sedan. “They’d like your help. Stefano isn’t waking up.”

Sett nodded, got out of the car, and paused. “You look pale, you okay?”

“Yeah, just a lot of…smells.”

A wry smile and she patted my shoulder, then handed me her keys. “Mint and lavender in the trunk. Go grab a little and you’ll feel better.”

I headed for her trunk while she went inside. A black case was in the back and I opened it to find a miniature herbal apothecary. Color me impressed, because I was going to get Auntie Sett to help me set up one of these. Sin and I could both find a lot of use for something like this. I found the catnip mint and lavender and put a little of both into a mesh bag. Crushing it between my palms, I rubbed it under my nose before just breathing through the bag a few times. The pressure eased and I felt my shoulders drop. I gave myself a moment before I closed up the case.

I tucked the bag into my bra, adjusted my shirt, and headed back inside. The guard at the door wrinkled his nose at the strong scent of mint and lavender. I just smiled at him and headed to the back. By the time I got back there, Auntie Sett had done her work and Stefano leaned back against the raised end of the table as he chatted with the doctor. Candace shook Sett’s hand as she thanked her profusely.

Sin stood near Benny, so I headed over there.

“So, if we could borrow the trailer and a couple of guys…” I heard Sin say before I stopped beside Benny.

“The sooner we get our stuff out of his way, the better we’ll all be. He’s none too stable right now with Dad missing,” I said.

Benny nodded. “It happens with some of the really old ones. The slightest emotional upheaval and they become unstable shifters. Emmett and I will bring the trailer and a tow truck over in about half an hour. You kids get moving.”

Auntie Sett met us at the door. “Stefano is going to be fine. He’ll need to rest for a couple of days, but no ill effects beyond that. You two want some help?”

“That’d be great, Auntie. Thank you,” I said as we headed to the cars. “Meet you at the cabin. We’ll take the wards down once we get there.”

It took us less time to empty the cabin and barn than it did to fill it. We packed it all up into the car, trucks, and trailer and headed to Grandma's before it got dark. Sett and I moved the house stuff while the guys handled the garage stuff on the unloading side. I ordered a stack of pizzas to feed everyone before they drove home. Shifters were like hobbits, they had second breakfasts and third suppers. Granted, witches weren't much better when they were casting or working, but human appetites were more the norm for them. Either Grandma herself or someone she'd sent over had cleaned the cottage and put fresh bedding on the beds. There was even a casserole in the fridge for us to heat up.

Being here meant wi-fi, and both Sin and I had a rash of messages and calls to return. Bella had sent me about thirty, asking where I was and if we were okay. I messaged her back that we were okay, just spending time with family and had been out of cell range. That was pretty much the same message I sent to everyone else that asked.

Sin and I added our wards to the house after he'd called Grandma to thank her for the cleaning and food and checked on Mom. Since she was sleeping, we decided to just go to bed ourselves. Breakfast in the morning at Grandma's with everyone came early.

Chapter Six

Sin

I lay in bed, exhausted and wanting to sleep but unable to shut my brain off enough to do so. I'd been busy answering all of the texts and voicemails I'd racked up over the past few days. I wished I could go hang with my friends and have a couple of beers, play some pool and let it all go. But that wasn't in my near future. Unfortunately. I was lucky if you could call it that, that I'd broken up with my latest girlfriend last week. Tanya had been fun, and human, but she started asking too many questions, so I let her go. Between the questions and the clinging, I was done.

The last guy Sid had dated, ended up friend-zoned to the point where he let her sleep in his car and hang out at his place and not even get a snuggle. She had a way with people. I tended to be more judgmental and less trusting. Aaron figured as long as he was in her life as a friend, he had a chance. I didn't have the heart to tell him he had a better chance of being hit by lightning or winning the lottery.

It was really quiet here. Even at the cabin, there had been some traffic noise. Well, that and animal noise from the shifters. Here, the only noise was the wind through the trees or blowing across the fields. I cracked the window open to let in some air and the scent of the herbs on the late spring breeze calmed me enough to sleep. My last thoughts were of Dad. I hoped he was somewhere safe.

* * *

Breakfast the next morning at Grandma's was a noisy affair. Sid, me, Grandma, Auntie Sett, Evelyn Rue, Jolie, and Mom around the kitchen table. Yes, Mom. She looked a little tired and pale, still, but she was eating, talking, and laughing with everyone. Ty, one of the farmhands, came in with fresh strawberries and ended up at the table with the rest of us. It felt like Thanksgiving and Christmas all rolled into one.

"Mom, don't tire yourself out too much," Sid said as she refilled Mom's teacup. "Let us wait on you for a bit longer, okay?"

Mom kissed Sid's cheek and laughed. "If this is what it takes to get you to wait on me? Maybe I'll get kidnapped more often."

Everyone laughed or 'oohed' at that empty threat and I tossed my napkin at my mother. "Don't you even think about it. We'll spell you into a room and never let you out."

"Did you all hear that? Threats from my son. Well, I never," Mom teased back.

For all the laughter, we still had our worry for Dad in the back of our minds.

"What do you kids have planned for today?" Mom asked.

"Some unpacking and sorting at the cottage, then we need to go run a couple of errands and pick up our graduation packets," Sid said.

"Yeah, if we don't get them, they'll try and mail them, and the only address they have is our old one."

Mom looked sad and I felt bad for mentioning it. "Maybe tomorrow, if you feel strong enough, you could come to the cottage and see what we saved?"

"Sure, Sin. That sounds good," Mom said.

Sid leaned over and whispered to her and Mom's expression brightened. I figure she told her we had all of the important stuff and her jewelry. I knew there were some heirloom pieces in there that it would've been sad to lose to a fire.

I checked my phone and nudged Sid. "We need to get going or we'll be late."

* * *

I pulled up outside the bank. Sid and I had agreed a long time ago to have separate savings accounts but a joint spending account. It was easier when most of our gifts were cash or checks 'to the twins' and we had to divide it up anyway. Besides, we were both good with money and if there was something big one of us wanted, we talked about it. Dad said it was good training for when we got married. We figured that was a very big *if* rather than a *when*. The money from Grandpa needed to get deposited and we had to get the trust fund books settled.

When you had this much money for them to process, the bank manager herself came out to usher us into her private office.

"Mr. and Ms. Boudreau, to what do we owe this honor?" the manager, Mrs. Aucoin said as she sat behind her desk, leaving us with the two leather side chairs in front of it.

Sid gave the lady what I called her lawyer smile and settled her purse on her lap. "We have some business to transact. A cash deposit and the settlement of our trust funds in our names with no oversight or guardian."

I opened my messenger bag on my knees and slid the two bank books out and handed them to Sid while I pulled out the bundles of cash. I stacked them on the edge of the manager's desk and watched Mrs. Aucoin's eyes widen.

"I see. Well, let me get the paperwork we'll need, and we can get started," she said.

Sid leaned forward and set the two books on her desk. "This should be easy. The trust accounts are already with this bank. We're just removing our grandparent's names from them."

I muttered under my breath, "And bringing us into the next century, away from paper books."

The manager opened one book. I almost laughed at the way her eyes widened and her face went pale. “You, uh, both, uh, have some identification?”

“Of course we do. But you already have our biometric print identification from when you escorted us back here. If that hadn’t been correct, we’d be in police custody right now. So, how about you take a breath before you pass out, go get those papers and we’ll finish up here. We *do* have other business we need to attend to today,” I said.

Sid just smiled at the manager as she folded her hands over her purse.

The manager, flustered, dropped the papers she pulled off the printer, so I got up and helped her collect them off the floor. I handed them to her, and she blushed. Great, a fan. Or something. While I might not be above using this in my favor, it was not something I liked to deal with. I sat back down to see what she did next.

Mrs. Aucoin counted the bundles of money and wrote the amount on a deposit slip. Sid filled out the rest of the slip and handed it back.

Aucoin sat at her computer and typed a few things then frowned. “I’m sorry, there’s a hold on these trusts. By Mr. James Boudreau?”

“A hold?” I asked.

“It means he hasn’t released the funds to us yet,” Sid said. “However, you know from our identification that we’re both twenty-one and named beneficiaries on the trusts. Legally, his hold is nullified.”

The manager gave Sid a faint smile. “Are you a lawyer?”

“Law student. But I do know the law, and I know I’m right.”

“Yes, you are correct. It just means an additional form needs to be filled out.”

Another sheet of paper slid out of the printer and I pulled it free, read it before I handed it to her. “This will cut any ties he has to this money, correct?”

“Yes, correct.” Mrs. Aucoin said.

“Then let’s get this all signed and witnessed,” Sid said.

Soon, all of the forms were filled out, signed and notarized.

“Congratulations, you’re both now the proud owners of your trust funds. I’d be remiss if I didn’t suggest you talk to our investment officers.”

I laughed a little. “Thank you, but we’re good. We appreciate all of your assistance in this.”

“You’re most welcome. Thank you for doing business with our bank.”

Sid got to her feet, accepted our copies of the paperwork, handed me mine and put hers in her purse. I slid mine into the messenger bag as we headed out of the office. Imagine how surprised we weren’t when we got to the lobby and saw our grandfather, and his lawyer, standing there.

Sid just turned away and kept walking, but I slowed my steps. Sid turned and arched a brow at me, so I waved her on. She had a fob to get into my car, and I wanted to see what the old man had to say.

“Sinclair,” Grandpa said. “I see you and that sister of yours wasted no time in claiming the money.”

“Good business, Grandpa. I see you wasted no time in trying to keep us from getting it.”

“Now, Mr. Boudreau,” the lawyer started, and my grandfather lifted his hand to silence the man.

“You’re both too young to manage those funds,” Grandpa said.

“Well, that’s for us to decide now, isn’t it? Have a good day,” I said and turned for the door.

“Don’t you disrespect me, boy,” Grandpa said, his voice a low growl.

I stopped and turned back to him, my eyes flashing green and gold for a moment. “Don’t you *dare* disrespect Sidonie or me, ever again. You’ve overstepped, old man, and it’s time you realized that. You held on too tight and now you’ve lost us. Think about that, the next time you feel alone in that brick monstrosity of yours.” With that said, I turned and walked out the door. We’d put up with a lot

from him and he'd only grown worse over the years. I was done submitting my sister, or myself, to his abuse.

I got into the car, then looked over at Sid. "So, now we're millionaires. Where do you want to go for lunch to celebrate?"

"Bubba's burgers. They still have the best fries and shakes."

"That's the sister I know and love," I said and laughed as we pulled away.

The money was nice to have. We didn't have to worry about jobs or housing. We could take the time we needed to find Dad and figure this out. I said this to Sid while we sat on the wall outside Bubba's and watched the boats on the lake.

"What are you trying to say, Sin?" Sid asked, feet swinging idly, her gaze on the boats docked below us on the pier.

"I'm saying that maybe we should rethink our plans. Benny hasn't heard anything about Dad. Auntie Sett can't find anything, and she's trying to find what she can. It's looking like actually finding Dad is going to fall on us. Grandpa is losing it, the witches can't do much without stepping on shifter toes and Benny isn't going to put his people at risk for one shifter who hasn't been an active part of the community for most of his life."

"I've been thinking about stuff too," Sid said. "And I think you're right. But we've been kept out of a lot, and don't have all the tools we need to do this right."

One thing about me and Sid is this. We only dive in when we know what we're getting ourselves in for. We did a ton of research about majors and colleges before we picked what we studied and where we went to school. This was going to be no different.

"So," I said, "We need to sit down with Sett and ask her some hard questions and then make our decision."

"Yeah, that's what I was thinking."

“Okay, let’s head back to the farm and find out what Auntie Sett can tell us, then do our lists tonight?”

“Yeah, let’s do it.”

Chapter Seven

Sid

Sin and I sat at the table in the cottage, notepads in front of each of us.

"It feels like four years ago, doesn't it?" I asked Sin.

"Yeah, it kinda does. Here we are, making lists and trying to decide what direction our lives will be going in."

"Well, the last time we did this, we made some good decisions, right?"

"I think so, yeah. Just a little disappointed that we're not following through on those decisions. I had my pick of Harvard or Johns Hopkins."

"You'll get to go later. Maybe we'll both end up at Harvard. That's where I was going too. I had there or Georgetown."

"See? We made it to the top choices in our fields. We can do that with this, too."

I let out a breath. "But the Academy? Are we nuts? We're just opening ourselves up to all kinds of abuse and bullshit. We'll be the only hybrids going there. We're related to the founders, to one of the directors, to professors…we'd be in for a ration of shit even if we were pure."

"Yeah, I know. It's insane. But it's the fastest way to get the training – and access to the information we need – to find Dad. It'll help us help Mom and maybe we can take down these Purist assholes so no one else has to lose their home and almost lose their parents."

I knew Sin was right, but this was like walking up to the mean girls in school and spitting in their faces. Being who we are, it was a red flag to anyone trying to make their mark.

"I know, Sid. This is the last thing I *want* to do, but it's what we have to do."

I looked down at the list, pushed it away and reached for my beer. I took a swallow and then held it up to Sin.

He lifted his and tapped my bottle. "To the Belle Cove Supernatural Police Academy. May they forgive us for what we're about to do."

I nearly snorted beer all over the table when I laughed at his toast. "Either they'll forgive us, bury us, or name another building after us."

"Or all of the above," Sin replied.

* * *

We had a few weeks before we had to report to the Academy, and that time was taken up with getting fitted for uniforms, taking placement tests, helping around the farm, spending time with Mom, and training. Lots and lots of training.

We did go to graduation, but it wasn't the celebration we had planned. We spent some time with our friends, but Mom hadn't been strong enough to go and Dad was still missing. Grandma came and Auntie Sett, and we got our diplomas mailed to us afterward anyway, so it seemed like not such a big deal. The family had a party and a fancy dinner for us, and that was nice, but without Dad, it felt flat.

We went on our daily run. Fifteen miles before breakfast every day. The first few times I couldn't eat breakfast afterward because I was too busy puking. Now I could sit down and eat, then go spend two hours on the firing range Sett had built out in the back reaches of the farm. After that, we spent time working with our magic. Then Sin and I drove over to Benny's place and worked on shifter skills. By the time I fell into bed at night, I was exhausted and slept hard. Which meant that most nights, if I dreamed, I didn't remember them.

I remembered this one.

I found myself in the woods behind the farm. Grandma's herb farm backed up to a state forest, so we'd run through them many times. I recognized the area, a good mile or so in from the farm.

Following a scent trail, I raced through the woods in my black leopard form, the forest floor silent under my paws as I ran. The scent of blood filled my nostrils and I slowed my pace to a careful walk, not wanting to rush up on a predator. My senses told me Sin was nearby in his wolf form, but I didn't see him. I climbed a tree to edge out on a branch, the view better from on high. I saw a black wolf laid out in a small clearing, blood splattered around it. A fight had left the wolf injured, but he wasn't the only one. A large brown wolf lay a few feet away, clearly dead.

Something in this dream felt wrong. It felt too real to be just a dream. I woke, confused and disoriented, replaying what I'd dreamt until I realized the black wolf looked like my father's shifted form.

I didn't care that it was only four in the morning, I pulled on the running clothes I'd left out the night before and pounded on Sin's door.

"Wake up, I had a dream, we need to go check it out," I yelled.

"What the hell, Sid? You had a dream. Go back to sleep."

"Come with me," I yelled again.

"Let me go back to sleep," Sin yelled back.

Not willing to waste more time arguing, I pulled my hair up into a ponytail as I walked away. "I'm going into the forest behind the storage barn," was yelled in his direction. I stuffed my phone into a pocket on the way out the door. It was almost three miles from the cottage to the forest edge behind that barn, so I stretched against the porch railing before starting my run.

I pulled on my magic and my shifter energy to sharpen my vision in the predawn light. Everything stood out in sharp relief as I crossed the fields. The scent of various herbs rose in the air when crushed under my feet. Even staying on the

paths, some still spread out and I enjoyed the perfume of lavender, sage, and different types of mint.

A sense of urgency washed through me and I took a deep breath, putting on a burst of speed. I cleared the tree line and slowed my pace. Sin had got out of bed and followed me. I could sense him about five minutes back. As I worked my way through the trees, the scent of blood grew stronger – just like it had in my dream. I could feel the shift coming but pushed it back. If I had to shift to fight, it would only take a moment, but if I had to save a life, I'd need my hands.

Sin moved up behind me just as I reached the clearing. I lifted my hand and signaled him to stay quiet as we crept up and looked through the trees. It was just like my dream, and yet it wasn't. There were two wolves lying in the clearing, but both were dead – and neither one was our father. He was standing between them, growling at us, blood dripping from his muzzle.

"Dad? Hey, it's okay, it's me, Sin," Sin said as he pushed through the brush, hands held out, palm up. "We've been looking for you. Can you shift back?"

The huge black wolf growled louder and snapped at Sin, stopping his movement forward.

I slid out of the trees behind Sin and pushed my magic senses into the clearing. "Sin, don't move. There's something under the brush at about ten on the clock. A trap of some kind. I can sense the electrical pulse of a battery or a timer."

Wolf Dad turned toward me and whined. I nodded, closed my eyes and focused. "They're all over the clearing. Levitate Dad straight up and do not put him down until he's past that little spruce tree at nine on the clock. Got it?"

"Yep, got it. Dad, don't wriggle, okay?" Sin said and let out a breath. Wolf Dad lifted straight up about two feet off the ground. A slight wriggle from Dad had him bobbing up and down about six inches. "Don't move, Dad. Please," Sin gasped out, the strain clear in his voice. Once Dad was clear of the tree, Sin put him down, then backed himself up until he was beside me again.

“I didn’t sense any life in those two – do you?” I asked Sin. I needed him to double-check because we couldn’t get in there after them.

“No life. And none in the bear shifter about ten feet to your right, either.”

“Jeezus, what the hell happened here?” I turned to ask Dad, and he was gone. “Dad, come back,” I called out, but no reply. I looked at Sin, and he nodded and shifted into his wolf. Nose to the ground, he whined once and then took off after Dad.

I backed up a few more feet, then turned and ran back to the farm. We were going to need a lot of suppression magic to deal with the booby traps someone had planted all over the forest. As I got closer to the main house, I realized that if I hadn’t had that dream, Dad would’ve probably been killed, and we wouldn’t have known about the explosives. Not until one of us ran over them.

Auntie Sett came to the door, a cup of coffee in her hand. “Siddie, what’s going on?”

“We need a power circle. Someone planted IEDs inside the state forest, about half a mile in, in the clearing to the left of the trail. I sensed a few more off to the right of the trail and some on the trail further in. I didn’t push too much because I didn’t know if magic would trigger them. Sin’s out in the forest right now, trailing Dad.” I waved my hand as she started to ask questions. “We don’t have time for that right now. They both know about the explosives and were headed out of the forest. I’m worried that a freakin’ squirrel is going to run over one of those and trigger a chain reaction of explosions.”

“Wait, what did you find in the clearing?” Sett asked.

I leaned against the back-porch railing, stretching as I cooled down. I described the scene in the clearing to her. “So, it looked to me like Dad interrupted those two running off after they planted the explosives, wounded them and chased them into the clearing. They cornered him, he gave the killing bites and when they fell, they

trapped him. If he'd jumped over one, he would've hit a bomb. He could've jumped the other, but he couldn't sense the explosives like Sin, and I can with our magic."

"Okay, so I have one question," Sett said. "How did you know to go to the clearing? Two hours before you'd normally be up and running?"

"Um, I had a dream?"

"Are you asking me or telling me?"

"I had a dream. But in my dream, Dad was dead in the clearing."

"You'll need to tell your Grandma about this. Precognitive dreams are a whole separate study group of magic."

"Oh, joy," I mumbled.

"What was that?" Sett asked.

"Nothing, Auntie. Are we going to get a power circle together?"

"I'll talk to your Grandma in a few minutes. You call your brother home and go shower and change. No running this morning. Someone has figured out your schedule and planned a nasty surprise. Time to change things up a bit."

I hadn't thought of that. Yet. I like to think I would've put it together after I had some coffee, but yeah, whoever planted those explosives knew roughly where Sin and I had been running every morning. I sent out a mental call to him to come to me as I ran to our cottage. I slowed as I got closer, the feelings of paranoia made me want to scan around the house too, just to be safe.

It was a good thing I did. Tripwires ran across the front steps, but whatever they were going to trigger hadn't been set up yet. As I made my way around the house, I saw why. I pulled out my cellphone and took a couple of pictures before calling Sett. "Hey, Auntie. I have a couple of presents for you at our cottage. I need you to come by right now." Then I sent her the pictures.

I heard her answer through her laughter. "On my way."

Sin was seated, in wolf form, just below the little awning roof over the basement's outside door. Perched on the awning, clutching the drainpipe to the

roof, were two men in gas company overalls.

"Let me guess. You two do *not* work for the gas company, correct?"

"Get that wolf away from us, you stupid twat! He took a chunk out of Eddie's leg and almost took my hand off," one of the two yelled at me.

"Yeah, like asking me so nicely means I'll do it?" I reached out and rested a hand between Sin's ears.

~Go ahead, snap and growl at them.~ I said. As long as we were touching, we could use telepathy.

~Naw, I don't want to clean the piss off the side of the house.~

~Good point. Sett's coming with a couple of helpers to arrest them.~

I smiled up at the two and fought a yawn. I was going to eat my weight in food and then sleep after all this.

Sett showed up with two SPD agents and got the two off the awning and into a squad car before they could piss all over the house. She took photos of the tripwire and then took it down to bag up as evidence. I watched her work while Sin went inside to shift back and get some food started.

"Are you going to need us to take the IED down?" I asked Sett.

"No, I'd rather you two stayed here for a while today, out of sight but near to hand. Take today as a book study day, would you? For me? I'll get an explosives team out to help dismantle the mess in the forest and a couple more teams to make sure there aren't any other nasty surprises anywhere. Tonight, at moonrise, come to the main house and we'll all do some different wards using the maps."

"Okay, we will. Thanks, Auntie." I hugged her and went inside to shower and change. The wards had been set individually and with several filters since the shop was on the farm and some of the fields bordered other property and we didn't want to zap a neighbor for chasing an animal over a stone wall or something. Now, with today's events, we'd have to be more proactive at keeping danger away.

I came down in sweatpants and a t-shirt to find Sin stacking food up on the counter. I pulled out the juice and a bowl of chopped fruit and added it to the pile.

"Thank you for cooking," I said as I slid onto a stool and grabbed a plate. "I'm starving."

"Well, I knew I could eat a ton after this morning and figured you would need it too, so I tossed some of those leftover pancakes on a tray in the oven to heat up, nuked some sausages in the microwave and scrambled up eggs. This whole cooking extra for later thing you've been doing is paying off."

"It's something Mom used to do, and I realized with all of the training and studying we've got going on, having some quick meals sometimes would be good."

"So, what did Sett have to say?"

I swallowed the mouthful of pancake and washed it down with some juice before I answered. "We're to stay here and out of sight for the day. She asked us to please just do a book study day and hang around the house. I'm cool with that."

"I wanted to try and track Dad again before too many people mucked up the scent trail."

"Dad knows we're here now. He'll come to us when he's ready. I'm sure he's working some angle or something and doing his best to keep us all safe. You know how he works."

"I know. He was already healed up by the time he lost me along the highway. We did talk a little, once I got furry, but while he was grateful we pulled his ass out of the fire, he was not happy that we were out there at all. So, with Dad *and* Auntie Sett both wanting us to stay put for a day, I think we should. Besides, I have a lot of laundry to catch up on and you're three chapters behind me in Procedures reading."

"That's because I did my laundry more than once in the past month," I retorted and pinched my nose. "Your dirty clothes are stinking up the house."

He stuck a grape on his spoon and shot it at me and I retorted with a handful of scrambled eggs.

Needless to say, the laughter kept on even as we cleaned up our mess and settled in to study. Sometimes, childish antics with your sibling were the only answer to a very weird and unsettling day.

Chapter Eight

Sin

To be honest, I was just fine with a day at home. Laundry was getting done while I took over one of the couches for homework. Sett had got us into some online classes that would give us a bit of an edge. We were going to need it. Being what we are was going to make things difficult, as we were well aware. It had been difficult for our whole lives.

Most paranormal kids go to what mundanes see as a private school where we learn the usual subjects alongside magic and shifter skills and control. And politics. We learned early that most kept to their own. Witches with witches and shifters with shifters. Hell, even shifters got cliquey with those who preferred fur not hanging out with those that preferred feathers. For a while, I leaned towards my shifter side. Hanging out as a young wolf with a pack of fellow wolves was awesome for a young boy. Sid had always leaned towards the witch side. She is still better than me at spells and magical manipulation on the fly. I've always been more comfortable with my shifter side – and that's all on Grandpa.

When a shifter child is about eight or nine years old, they make their first shift into what will be their primary shifted form. For me? It was a wolf, like Dad. For Sid? A raven. As far as Grandpa was concerned, she might as well have shifted into a toad. He saw me first and cheered, came over and ruffled my fur and talked about how much like the other Boudreaus I was. Then he asked where Sid was and I bounced over to the stump she was perched on top of. He took one look at her and started laughing. "A trash bird," he called her, then grabbed a stone and threw it at

her. Sid hopped to the side and avoided the first stone, but not the second. She tumbled off the stump and I dashed over to protect her from any other stones. Grandpa came towards us and I growled at him, showing teeth. He threw the last rock at me and I took the blow to keep it from Sid. If it had hit her, it would've seriously damaged her. I got her up on my back and we headed home. A young wolf with a raven on his back, making our way through the park to the tree line that backed up to our house. It was about two hours before we shifted back to human and I didn't see Sid shift again unless she absolutely had to, and then she'd shift back as soon as possible.

It wasn't until we were a little past eighteen that things changed. Sid and I had gone hiking and at one point, the trail crumbled under my feet and I slid down a cliff. I couldn't climb back up, the cliff was too unstable to shift. Every time I moved, more of the cliff tumbled free. "Sid, you need to get Dad or Benny to help get me out of here."

She tied off a rope to a tree a good ways back and tossed it down to me to tie around my waist in case the cliff fell away even more.

"It'll take forever to get back there. Let me try and pull you up," Sid said.

"No, Sid. Every twitch sends more of this cliff away. You need to shift and fly to get me some help."

"Yeah, I'll run."

I turned to look up the cliff at her and even more tore away, leaving me hanging by one hand wrapped around a thick root wedged into the crack of a boulder. I dug my feet in a bit more and screamed at Sid. "Just get someone now!"

I heard her choked cry of pain from a fast shift and then saw a raven soar overhead and fly back towards home. Sid was hauling ass, so I closed my eyes and focused. I could solidify the air under my feet for a bit, and then try and lift myself inch by inch. I wasn't very good, back then, with the float spell, so it only got me up far enough for me to wrap both arms over the boulder and hold tight to the root.

Now I just had to hope the hill didn't let go enough to send this boulder towards the valley below, along with everything else.

It had been maybe fifteen minutes and Sid flew back with a pair of hawks behind her. I felt the shiver of magic from the three shifts and then heard Dad's voice.

"Hang on, Sin, we'll have you up in a moment."

Benny said, "When we say, let go of the rock and grab the rope, use your feet to keep from being dragged against the cliff. Got it?"

"I got it. Thank you."

"Don't thank us yet, we haven't got you safe," Benny teased, and my dad snorted a laugh.

It took them just a few minutes to belay the rope around the tree and pull me up the cliff. I stumbled over to the tree and just lay on the ground for a moment, letting my trembling muscles relax.

Dad was moving up and down the trail area, then took a couple of branches and drove them into the ground, tying some of the rope between them. "When we get back down, we'll let Tim know the trail up here is eroded and needs to be re-worked further in. This will show him where the damage is."

"You mean, he won't be able to tell by the missing section of the trail?" Sid said.

"Don't be a smart ass. This should also keep any hikers from getting hurt. You two ready to head back down?" Dad said.

Benny came over and gave me a hand up, then turned to my Dad. "I'm gonna fly on back. I left the boys trying to pull an engine."

"Appreciate the assist, Benny," Dad said.

"Thanks for helping out, Uncle Benny," I added. No, he wasn't our uncle. More of a distant cousin, but he was my Dad's friend, and around a lot.

I gave Sid a half-hug and kissed her temple. "Thanks for not letting me die, sis."

“Yeah, make me have to shift again when it’s not time, and I’ll push you over a cliff.”

I could tell by the tone in her voice that she was mostly serious. However, after that, we went out to different places and practiced shifting so that it wouldn’t hurt the next time she did it. She still preferred her witch skills over her shifter skills, but it wasn’t all or nothing anymore.

Policy and Procedure class was mostly reading and going over case studies, then writing what policies called for what procedures in handling each case. Yes, it truly was that boring. I’d finished my last case study yesterday and now I was reading a book written by one of our professors. A psychological break down of several serial killer cases all compiled in one book. I got it in audio, so I was listening to an interview with Dahlmer while folding laundry.

Talk about a creeptastic psycho. I’m going to blame my utter focus on the audiobook and the warm, seductive comfort of laundry on why I had no warning when Sid snapped a thick rubber band and it pinged my ear. I yelled and spun around, tossing the basket of folded laundry in the air and landed on my ass. Sid’s laughter made its way through my earbuds, so I tugged one free and threw a balled-up pair of socks at her head.

“Aren’t you supposed to be doing homework?” I said.

“Yes, but it’s boring. Scaring the crap out of you was much more fun.”

“I’m sure. Well, now you can help me pick up all my laundry. Want to order pizza for lunch?”

Sid had already started to pick up the stuff and had tossed it into the basket. “Pizza? Sure, but I’m ordering.”

“I know, I know – and I’m paying.”

“Yep,” Sid gave me a smug smile as she pranced into the other room.

I swapped the next load around and added it to the now very full basket of laundry. I dropped onto the sofa and the sound of an explosion had me back on my feet, headed for the front door.

Sid ran out behind me and we both stood at the railing, eyes on the smoke.

Moments later, my cell phone rang, I put it on speaker. "Go ahead, Sett. We're listening."

"That was a controlled detonation. You guys can relax. Some of the IED were too unstable to transport so we had to blow them. I thought Ty had called, he thought I had called and we both dropped the ball. I'm sorry."

"It's okay, Sett. We get it. I'm just glad you got them all. How far were they spread?" Sid asked.

"About three miles deep into the forest and they followed several of the trails, reaching out from the Timmons property to the north and the Stansfelds to the south," Sett said.

"Holy crap, that's a lot of boom," I exclaimed.

"Yeah, so there will be a couple of these controlled detonations. We need to let this cool down and then we'll do the next, so probably one every thirty minutes or so. I'll call you when we're done."

"Thanks, Sett, appreciate it. Be safe, okay?" I said

"Will do."

Sett hung up and I let out a breath. "Shit, I thought for sure we were being attacked again."

"I didn't know what to think," Sid said, "Until she said they followed the trails. Our trails." She turned to look at me and took my hands in hers. "Are we making a mistake by going to the Academy? If they're going to *this* much effort to try and take us out, what will they do when we're in a place where combat and firearms training is the norm?"

Sid was right. What we were doing was insane. It was also exactly what Dad had told me we had to do. I hadn't shared it with Sid, and I wasn't sure how to tell her what Dad had said while we were both in wolf form. He had told me that the voices of their kidnappers had been familiar. That the ones that took my parents, nearly killed them and burned our home to the ground – were insiders. He said he didn't know if it was the drugs, trauma, or something else, but he thought one of the voices had sounded like his father. I told him we'd already cut ties with Grandpa. He said not to cut him out completely. The whole 'enemies closer' thing. Yeah, Sid wasn't going to be okay with that.

"It's crazy, yeah, but remember what Dad always said? Keep your friends close and your enemies closer. Getting inside their organization is our best bet."

"It's also our riskiest move yet."

"Yes, it is that. But since when have we shied away from risky?" I said.

"True that." Sid took a deep breath. "So, how about we twin-tag-team our classes like we did in high school?"

Now that wasn't a bad idea. "Okay, for the academic stuff only. We both need to do the physical on our own."

"Great. So, you can fill me in on Policy and Procedures and I'll give you Criminology 101. I got through it in three days. It was mostly a refresher for me since I took criminology classes as part of my degree program," Sid said.

"Slick, sis. That was slick," I laughed and pointed to my laundry. "Start folding and I'll get the last load. We can fold and talk."

Her laughter followed me into the laundry room.

Chapter Nine

Sid

We were two days away from reporting to the Academy and I was taking some time to hang out with Mom. Whatever the kidnappers had done to her, while she had healed from the wounds, she hadn't yet regained her strength. Evelyn Rue thought there had been a magical component to the attacks and somehow the drain had damaged Mom's life essence. She was still a sarcastic, smart-mouthed, brilliant witch - who had become so fragile.

"Hey, Mom. I brought your favorites. Up for some girl time?" I set the bag of snacks on the table by the window and went to throw the old flowers out, putting the fresh ones I'd brought into place. Mom fumbled with her pillows, so I adjusted them for her and helped her sit up.

"What brings you by today, Siddie?"

"Huh. I can't want to spend some time with my Mom?" I teased. Truth be told, every minute I got to spend with her, felt like a gift.

Mom took my hand and tugged me down to sit beside her. "Sidonie Marie," she said, a finger tucked under my chin to help me meet her eyes. "Listen to me, my daughter. You can't make your life about grieving or worrying about when others will die. Life happens in the right now."

Something about her words rang deep inside me and I felt a burst of fear that she was telling me she was dying. A breath hissed through my teeth and Mom patted my cheek.

“No, Siddie, I’m not dying right this minute. But I almost did and, while I’m not eager to die, I’m okay with it happening whenever it happens. I know there is something else for us on the other side.”

“And here I thought I’d paint your nails and share treats with you and talk about books and things,” I said, doing my best to lighten the mood.

“We can still do all that, but I had a dream last night after your father visited me.”

“Dad visited you? Is he okay? Where is he staying? What…”

“Sidonie, quiet. Listen,” she said in that Mom tone that had my teeth clacking together I stopped talking so fast. “Your father is fine. He’s working a different angle than everyone else. He’s been checking in now and then, and he’s safe as he can be while working a case.”

I nodded at her words and chewed my lower lip.

“We also spoke about the two of you. He’s worried about you going to the Academy and shying away from your shifter side. I am, too. You can’t waste your talent, Siddie. Not everyone is born with a talent, and you and Sinclair were blessed with two. If you have a talent, you must use it. If you throw it away, you throw away everything that makes you, you. Am I making sense?”

I tried to understand not only the words she was speaking, but what she was trying to tell me, and I didn’t wholly get it. “Yeah, I guess,” I said.

“Why don’t you pour us some of that juice you brought and then I want you to get me that painted box out of the bottom of my chest.”

I poured two glasses of the juice and handed one to Mom, put the other on the table, and went to get the box. We’d brought all of Mom and Dad’s personal stuff over to the cottage from the things we’d saved before the house burned down. The trunk that Grandpa had tried to keep is where Mom had the box stored. I pulled the box from the trunk and took it to Mom. It measured about one foot by two feet, and about eight inches deep, painted all over with colorful knotwork designs and

weighed a few pounds. Silver corner pieces and a knotwork swirl of silver on the front that looked like an antique brooch added to the beauty and mystique of the piece.

Mom pressed her palm to the brooch piece and whispered a few words that I couldn't quite make out. A soft click and she lifted the lid. I could only see a little from my perspective – the corner of a red leather book, some loose papers, a photo or two, and something shiny, like a necklace chain. She rummaged around in the box, pulled out a few things to set beside her where I couldn't see and then closed the box. I picked it up and set it on the table, then took my glass and sipped the juice. I knew better than to push Mom for information – she'd tell me when she was ready.

"Before you go to the Academy, there are a few things you should have. They'll help protect and educate you."

"I appreciate it, Mom. What do you have there?"

She lifted a necklace, the chain a twist of silver and gold. The pendant was an ornate disc, about the size of a quarter with a gold fleur-de-lis set in a silvery metal, likely white gold. Worn etchings around the edges on the front and on the back, a deep engraving of a stylized F set with gemstones at the cardinal points.

"This has been passed down through the Fortin family for centuries. It is a protection charm and a warning system. If something is threatening, it warms up. Just wear it against your skin. It also helps deflect any negative spells cast at you."

I cupped the charm in my hand, then looked up at Mom. "Are you sure you want me to have this?"

"What kind of question is that? Of course, I do. You are going where I cannot protect you, and you are the next Fortin heir, so yes, you should have this."

When I looped the chain over my head and dropped the charm down my shirt, I felt a shiver run through me. It brushed against my skin and instantly warmed, then settled to skin temperature. "Thank you, Mom."

“Don’t worry, I’ve got something for Sinclair, too. A bracelet from your father’s family that does the same for him.”

“Good, thanks.”

“And then there’s this,” she said and handed me the red leather book.

About the size of a trade paperback, but easily four inches thick, I opened it and saw that the pages were a mix of old and new. “What is this?” I asked her.

“It’s the family grimoire. I had it recovered with this red leather about twenty years ago. The original cover nearly dissolved in my hands.”

“How old is it?” I handled it with reverential care.

“The first entry is dated 1695, when Aimee de Rohan left Salem, Massachusetts for the wilds of Belle Cove and her marriage to Jacques Fortin. This was a small French trader outpost in those days and Aimee got out of Salem after watching several of her non-witch neighbors die from false accusations. The real witches stayed out of the whole Trials.”

“How are the pages not dissolved into dust?” Then I laughed at myself. “Duh, magic.”

“Yes, magic. I’ve added my own work over the years, but it is now time for you to have it. I know you have your personal grimoire, as do I – and yes, you’ll get that someday too. But this is the family grimoire. This is where you put those things that are uniquely your magic, your thoughts, ideas, and the way magic is viewed in your world.”

I carefully turned a few pages. “The names, Mom. We’re related to all of these people? Aimee’s grandson, Rohan Fortin wrote something, dated 1775, about the first battle in the Revolutionary war. This is incredible.”

“You and your brother were almost named Reina and Rohan. Reina is an ancestor who made gunpowder twists for the Union soldiers.”

“This is fascinating. Thank you, Mom. I’ll cherish it and take good care of it.”

“I know you will. There’s a special case for it on the top of the bookcase over there. It is spelled to protect the book against fire, water, any kind of damage really. It also has a homing spell tied to that charm. If you lose it or it is stolen, you can use the pendant to locate it.”

“That’s amazing, Mom. Thank you.” I let out a slow breath and took a minute to process everything she’d told me. “So,” I said as I set the grimoire aside. “Do you want peach or rose nail polish today?”

The rest of my visit with Mom was more normal. I did her nails, we had pastries and juice, and when she started yawning, I tucked her in. I took my heirlooms and the protective box and left her to sleep. In the kitchen, Grandma waited for me.

“Siddie, come sit with me for a little bit? If you’ve got time for your old Grandma?”

“Old? Grandma, you’re not even looking middle age in the eye. Don’t pull the frail old lady act with me.” I laughed at her and kissed her before I found a seat at the table.

“So, you got the heirlooms. Good. It’s well beyond time that you should have had them.”

“How old was Mom when you gave them to her?” I poured the coffee, grateful for the caffeine.

Grandma set a plate of sandwiches on the table and I took a chicken salad with spring lettuce on a homemade crusty roll. The food here was always amazing.

“Well, you and Sin were about three years old or so, so she was twenty-six? Something like that.”

I took a swallow of coffee to wash the sandwich down, one brow arched at my grandmother.

“Yes, I am aware that it was a bit late, but we were still processing the fact that she’d married a shifter and not a witch.”

“Bigoted much?” Yeah, I said it, but not in a mean way.

“We were, yes. I got to know your Dad and he’s an incredible person. Most of our experiences with shifters before him were less than positive. That’s changed, obviously.”

“Benny’s told us some of the problems shifters and witches had before. He remembers the war, too. The fact that he was friends with Mom and has helped Sin and I, says a lot about his character.”

“Let me speak truth to you, Sidonie. I was angry at your mother for not choosing a witch husband. I was terrified when she became pregnant because most hybrid babies died before or shortly after birth. I did not want that pain for my own precious child.” Grandma reached out and took my hand. I watched as she straightened in her chair and looked at me. “I am Alicia Meline Fortin, daughter of Marcel Fortin and Margaret Fraser, wife of the late Pierre Fortin. You, Sidonie Marie, look so much like your aunt Marie-Sidonie, yet you have stronger magic, a brilliant, strategic mind, and the added gift, or curse, of your shifter side.”

Her words shivered through me and I took no offense, simply curled my fingers around her work-scarred hand and listened.

“When I see how much you resemble my own Sidonie, my heart both aches and fills with joy. Our Fortin bloodline is the oldest and most pure witch bloodline in Belle Cove until you and your brother came along. I was even wed to a distant Fortin cousin in Pierre because the World War had taken so many young men, there were too few to choose from.” Grandma looked down at our joined hands and cupped mine in both of hers. “Many would call this a stain on our family. Many have said that the taint in the bloodline brought on by your birth should be erased from the family records, meaning they want to disinherit you and not allow you to claim your bloodline heritage. I fought them all.” Her gaze lifted to meet mine. “Because I believe you and your brother are the saviors of our family and not the curse so many claim. You have shown this old woman that long-held beliefs can be

wrong. You and Sinclair have brought fresh life and strength to the Fortin family and for that, I am grateful."

I lifted our joined hands to my lips and kissed the backs of hers. "I love you, Grandma. You have always been a strong, loving woman who could run a business and a family, seemingly effortlessly. I admire you and hope to one day be as kick-ass as you are."

Grandma laughed at that, patted my cheek, then refilled my coffee cup. "Eat your sandwich, Siddie. You're getting skinny with all this prep for the Academy."

It was only then I noticed today's t-shirt. It said, "If you can't stir with the big girls, stay away from the cauldron." I snorted into my coffee, wiped my mouth, shook my head and kept laughing. "Grandma, I love your t-shirts."

"Let me tell you a little secret," she said. "When I was younger, I was always so concerned about being proper and socially perfect. Presenting the ideal image. I only wore work clothes when I was working. I had manicures every week. It was exhausting. Then I realized that no one cared. Your grandpa preferred me relaxed and comfortable. Your mom and her sisters liked it when I dressed up for special things but didn't care much about the day to day. I kept trying, but one day I heard Marie and Bernie arguing over how they looked and if they could wear this or that. I realized I was influencing their ideas of what was acceptable without even actively instructing them."

"Well, they say children learn what they live, right?" I asked.

"Exactly that, Siddie. Now I do like a manicure now and then, but I own an herb farm. No one expects me to have nail extensions and perfect hair. I take care of myself, but I do it for me, not for anyone else."

"That's a good lesson to learn. Mom showed me that early on. While friends of mine were chasing the latest fashion, I was spending my allowance on new books."

I finished my sandwich and got up to put the dishes in the kitchen. Grandma waited until I set them down, then hugged me so tight. "Be careful, Siddie. The

Academy is a dangerous place at the best of times. For you and Sinclair, it'll be worse."

Her worries echoed with mine, but I hugged her back and kissed her forehead. "We're going to be smart and careful, Grandma. I love you. Thanks for the sandwich."

"Love you too, Siddie girl. See you later."

Chapter Ten

Sin

I ran my fingers over the bracelet, then pulled my uniform sleeve down over it. I was proud to have a Fortin heirloom with protective qualities on my wrist. When Sid had come home after visiting Mom and Grandma and showed me the heirlooms, I felt relieved that she had something to protect her. Then she told me Mom had something for me, so I went to visit. She'd been really tired but had told me how proud of me she was and gave me the bracelet.

Sid and I had spent hours poring over the grimoire. It would take some time to get through all of it, but what we'd discovered so far was mind-blowing. All of that history tied up with our family mixed with the magic and spells. Impressive. Almost as impressive as the sheer amount of antagonism Sid and I have dealt with since showing up at the Academy a week ago.

To say this had been a rocky introduction would be an understatement. Already we'd had our rooms trashed, dead rats in our closets, molasses and oatmeal in our boots, and someone had actually defecated on my bed. Sure, we expected the usual hazing as new recruits, but this was beyond even the most extreme cases. Auntie Sett had a sample from the poop taken and tested. The two recruits that contributed to that particular donation had been expelled and fined. Luckily, Sett and Grandpa had managed to do it quietly. Sett even spread the rumor that they'd been sent on a special assignment. A special assignment that included them never going near the Academy.

We had wanted to stay in the dorms, but the sheer level of harassment was disruptive to the rest of the students, so we commuted from the herb farm cottage to the Academy. It was about a twenty-five-minute trip one way, so not too bad.

Before we started here, Sid and I both traded our cars in and got two small-sized black SUVs. It made sense with all of the gear we'd need to haul around as Agents. There was no way Sid would fit the basic kit duffel in her Mini Cooper unless she strapped it to the roof. We usually carpooled together, but today Sid was staying to research a paper. Auntie Sett would drive her home, so I loaded our gear into the SUV and got ready to head out. Settled in the driver's seat, I jumped at the knock on my window. The man standing there was someone I had not seen in nearly fifteen years. We had been told he was dead, yet my great-grandfather, Liam Walsh, stood there with a grin on his face and a twinkle in his eyes. I stared for a moment before he said, "Are you going to open the door and give your old Gramps a hug or just stare at me and wonder if you're hallucinating?"

I nearly gave myself whiplash trying to undo the seat belt and open the door.

Grampa wrapped his arms around me before I fully stood up. "Damn, Sin, you've grown. It's so good to see you."

"What the hell, Grampa Walsh? Everyone told us you were dead. Even Auntie Sett said you'd disappeared."

"I did, for a while. I needed people to think I was dead." Commander Walsh lowered his voice, then hugged me again. "Care to give this old man a ride?"

"Where do you want to go?"

"Your home. We need a place to talk, and I know Alicia Fortin's skill with wards and protections will keep you bug-free. Where's your sister?"

"Finishing some research for a paper in the library. Sett's going to drive her home when she's done."

"Let's swing by and get her. Neither one of you should be traveling alone."

I started to ask why, but when I looked at his face, I swallowed the words and started up the SUV.

Sid wasn't happy about leaving early, but Sett said she'd bring the books by later. Instructors could take them out, students could not. I didn't tell Sid *why* I needed her to leave right now, just that it was important. When I told her to get in the back seat, she looked at me funny, then slid in behind the driver's seat – and I barely got her door shut before she squealed "Grampa Walsh" loud enough to deafen us all. I gave it a moment, then pulled my door open and got in.

Grampa shut her down quickly by saying, "We'll talk at the cottage. It's not safe out here."

Sid buckled in and reached a hand to rest on Grampa's shoulder. He was the only Grampa we grew up with who treated her well, so she loved him fiercely.

Grampa reached up and held Sid's hand on his shoulder for a few minutes before he reached into his pocket and turned off his phone. "Don't need them tracking me right now."

"Should we shut ours off too?" Sid asked.

"No, but when you get home, put them in a drawer in your bedroom for a bit. They need to know where you two are, as recruits, but they don't need to hear anything."

I will admit, it was hard as hell to keep my mouth shut and the questions silenced until we got to the cottage. I pulled up right in front of the steps in case we had to worry about Grampa being visible for too long. Sid got out and opened the front door, gave the all-clear, then Grampa got out and went inside. I locked up the SUV and headed in. Grampa went into the kitchen and Sid and me to our rooms to change and drop our phones. By the time we got downstairs, the stew was reheating in a pot on the stove and coffee brewing.

I hugged Grampa, then dealt with getting the table set. Sid wrapped her arms around him and sighed as they hugged for a good bit, then released him to go stir the stew. Once we put the food on the table and poured the coffee and water, all three of us sat down and just looked at each other.

"You two look really good," Grampa said. "I've missed you."

"Forgive me for saying this, Grampa," I said, "But what the hell? You supposedly died fifteen years ago and now you're sitting here, having a creepy, secret reunion?"

Sid elbowed me and gave me her patented WTF look, then turned to Grampa. "He's right, Grampa. Secretive and back from the dead *is* kind of creepy. What happened? Why now? How can we help you?"

"Your phones?" he asked.

"In our rooms, in drawers," I said. Sid nodded.

Grampa started dishing up food for each of us as he spoke. "You already know how just after the Species War ended, I got together with Marcel Fortin to set up the Academy and then later, integrated it with the police department to create the Supernatural Police. If we'd had the SPD before, there's a good chance we never would have ended up in a war."

"What was it that started the war?" Sid asked.

"A death of a million cuts. No, I'm serious. It was a lot of little things. Little things kept building up and stacking up until it blew up in a street fight. An argument at a taco truck ended up with fourteen dead and nearly twenty more injured. If we'd had the SPD to break it up when it started, or around to diffuse any of the other para specific incidents, then the war would probably never have happened."

I'd read about the Taco Truck Terror, as the incident ended up being called in the history books. "But, hasn't there always been a ruling board for paranormals?"

"A board, sure. Make some rules, handle some high-level disputes, but no one around to effectively enforce the rules or deal with incidents at the street level. It

was fine when there were only five or six paranormal families in the region, but now there are hundreds of paras of all types in Belle Cove and the surrounding areas," Grampa said.

I sopped up the gravy from my stew with a bit of bread and chewed while I thought about his words. A sip of water, then I spoke. "Grampa, we've been reading the Fortin grimoire, since Mom gave it to Sid a few days ago. Is there information in there we should skip ahead to read?"

"I'd say so, yes," he replied. "If Margaret Fraser Fortin wrote in it, there would likely be a lot of good information for you both."

"Sounds like you knew Grandma Margaret well?" Sid said.

Grampa laughed low, gave me a wink, then sipped his coffee.

I laughed and shook my head, then got up to collect the bowls. "There's peach cobbler for dessert. Want some?"

"I'd never turn down Alicia's cobbler."

"Bernie's daughter, Jolie, made it. She lives with Grandma and helps run the farm," Sid said.

Grampa sobered and got the coffee pot to refill our mugs. "I'm glad Alicia has Jolie, you two, and what's the other one's name?"

"Micah. Marie-Sidonie's son. He moved down south about ten years ago. No one hears from him other than a card at Christmas to Grandma," Sid said as she brought the warm cobbler topped with vanilla ice cream over to the table.

"Well, he may be out of the area, but at least he's not…" Grampa paused, then stuffed a large spoonful of cobbler into his mouth.

"He's not what?" I asked.

You could almost feel the temperature of the room drop as Grampa swallowed his mouthful and looked over at me. "A traitor."

"Grampa B, you mean?"

“Yes. My son-in-law is a traitor. I’m just glad my sweet daughter, Brighid isn’t here to see this day.”

“What did he do?” Sid asked as she leaned forward, the lawyer in her coming to the fore.

“A lot of things,” Grampa sighed and took a couple of bites of cobbler washed down with coffee. “I had included James in the running of things from the time he was a young man. When Marcel passed on, I leaned on James to fill the gaps. As with most things viewed in the rear-view mirror, it seemed like a good idea at the time. All I did was invite the snake into the hen house. About five years after Marcel died, James made his play. I had planned a trip to the Isles with Bridie. We had a private plane that the SPD and Academy used together. Two of the instructors were taking five students to London to get specialized training with MI5’s paranormal branch. The plane exploded twenty miles off the coast. I’d been in the cabin with the pilot when the first explosion went off. I wrapped myself in a force field and went back to try and save Bridie, but she’d already been blown out of the plane. Only two of the students remained and as I reached out to grab the closest one, the second explosion detonated.” He reached for his coffee and drained it. I got up and filled it, then reached into the cabinet behind him and pulled out the good whiskey. He added a dose to his coffee and took another swallow. “Thanks, Sin. Anyway, I woke up in the cabin of a fishing boat. They said the Coast Guard had found Bridie and three others’ bodies, but not the rest. All were presumed dead. I paid them well to let people think I had died, too.”

“Grandma Brighid died in childbirth, as did her daughter, Bridie Walsh Boudreau. They’re buried in the mausoleum in the family plots behind Boudreau Manor.” Sid told him, a hand rested on his forearm. “They said the shock of losing you and Grandma Bridie was too much for her and she went into labor early.”

“I wasn’t in any condition to protect her, or you two, or anyone else. Brighid was too old to be pregnant safely, but she lost so many bairns over the years, I

understand why she had to try. Shifters can generally carry safely past sixty human years, but Brighid was nearly ninety when she got pregnant with that little girl."

I added a shot of whiskey to my cup and took a sip before I spoke. "Why did you come back now?"

"I've been working with your parents for the past three years, once I realized they were on the same path as me. They figured out that James was behind the increase in tensions between paras and the decline of standards at the Academy and started digging. I made them promise not to say anything about me being back. It was my fault they were attacked that morning at your home. Someone had followed me from where I was staying to your parents' house and tried to kill me. Your parents intervened and I got away, so the attacker took them. He left the message to trade for you, but he intended to lure me out."

I watched his hand tremble, so I added more whiskey to the mug he held.

"Who was it, Grampa?" Sid asked.

"Your uncle, Brian."

"Dad's brother, Brian?" Sid stared at him. "Are you serious?"

"Yes, I'm serious. He's been James' right hand since James took Marcel's place."

"So, Uncle Brian hurt Mom, nearly killed Dad, and burned our house down?" I said as I tried to process the information. "What the hell?"

"Wait, Mom's injuries were magic-based. Brian and Grampa are shifters, not witches," Sid said.

"Brian's girlfriend is a witch," Grampa said.

"Someone's dating that hobbit?" I found it hard to believe someone sincerely liked that moron. He was short, fat, bald, and had bad teeth.

"It's probably his money she finds so attractive," Sid said.

Grampa reached for the whiskey and poured about half a mug's worth into his cup.

“Holy hell, this family is fucked up,” Sid said. “So, is Dad working with you on this mess?”

“Yes, and Sett. And, I’m hoping the two of you will be on board as well,” Grampa said.

“Grampa, we’re not even two weeks into Academy training. We don’t know enough to help you,” I said.

“Let’s see,” Grampa said. “You graduated Summa cum Laude with a Bachelor’s degree in Biology and a minor in Chemistry, while your sister graduated Summa cum Laude with a Bachelor’s degree in Criminal Justice and a minor in Political Science. I’d say you both know quite a bit. I also know that you’ve both spent the last nearly six weeks training your asses off with Sett. So, yes, I think you know enough to help us.”

“But what about our training program? Are we supposed to stay at the Academy or leave or what?” Sid said.

“Oh, you’ll be staying in the program and working your fellow classmates to find out which ones are anti-armistice. Any ones you find that are rabid haters of witches, shifters, or any other paras, you let me, or Sett know. Also, after classes, you will go to Sett and she will bring you to me where I’ll work with you on advanced techniques.”

I leaned back in my chair and looked at my great-grandfather. “To what end?”

“Now, there’s the question I’ve been waiting for,” Grampa said. “To make you two of the best agents the Academy has ever graduated. Eventually, you two will run the SPD. Sett will run the Academy.”

Chapter Eleven

Sid

To say the last two months of Academy training were interesting would be an understatement. The small group of anti-armistice goons that had taken root in the Academy had been almost too easy to find. Being who we are had made us easy targets and therefore made it easy to round them up and get them expelled. Did I think they might band up outside of the Academy? Yeah, I did – but at least they wouldn't be wearing SPD uniforms. It wasn't like we rounded them all up and booted them at the same time. We were subtle. Careful. This one got expelled for cheating on a test. That one for failing a physical. Another for drinking in the dorms. That kind of stuff. We couldn't let on to Lord James what we were doing. And no, he's not a lordship or anything, that's just how I've been thinking of the man previously known as Grandpa B.

No, it's not a secret that I thought he was a misogynistic prick and hated having to do anything around the man, but he *is* my grandfather and family is family, y'know? Knowing that he didn't look at family the same way *did* mitigate that impulse somewhat. A little. Maybe more than a little.

Losing Grandpa B didn't truly bother me. Especially since Grampa Walsh had come back to life, so to speak. The first shock was seeing Grampa Walsh alive after believing he'd died with Grams Bridie in the plane crash. The second shock, the one I still needed to finish processing, hit when we learned Lord James was behind the attack on my parents and burning our house down. It took me a good two weeks

before the rage didn't make me want to just go up to him and punch him in the throat.

Sin had to deal with him instead of me because I just couldn't. He nearly killed my mother, leaving her a shadow of herself. He tried to kill his own son, my father, by burning down the only home I'd ever known. Gah, just thinking about it now made my blood boil. So, I tightened my gloves and slammed my fists into the bag a few more times. It helped.

I danced around the bag, hands and feet slamming into it as sweat ran down my face and glued my tank top to my skin. The buzzer sounded to warn cadets that they had thirty minutes until the next class started, but since I was done with classes, I kept going while others headed to the showers. I had about an hour before I had to hook up with Sin and go for our session with Commander Walsh.

Once the cadets had cleared out, I ended my cool down and headed in for my shower. I pulled on jeans and a t-shirt, then my boots and a hoodie. My bag on the bench, I turned to lock my locker, felt a sharp pain and it was lights out.

* * *

I had no idea how long I had been out, or what had taken me down, but the cottony metallic taste in my mouth made me believe I had been drugged. I slowed my breathing and kept my eyes shut, hoping that whoever had done this thought I was still out. My hands were bound to the arms of the chair and my ankles to the front legs. Something wound around my chest, holding me upright against the back of the chair. I felt a pain in the side of my neck, fading as my shifter healing worked its magic. One of Auntie Sett's lessons had been for just this kind of situation and I did my best to swallow my instinct for fear and focus. I could smell damp stone and dirt. It smelled like the root cellar at the herb farm, damp cinder blocks and a dirt floor. I didn't hear any movement or breathing that would indicate someone else

was in the room with me, but that also could just mean there were cameras. I wiggled a finger and moaned low, then fell silent and still once more.

Yep, there was a camera. How did I know? I heard someone open the door and step into the room.

"Wakey, wakey, Abomination. That shifter blood of yours should have healed you enough to be coming around by now," the very clearly male voice said.

I just moaned a little and let my head wobble sideways, still keeping my chin to my chest.

"Oh, that's right. You're only half shifter. Your nasty witch blood must've weakened your healing abilities."

Well, now I knew he was a shifter. That meant I could use magic against him and have the advantage.

Fingers twisted in my ponytail and pulled my head back, causing me to cry out in pain. My eyes snapped open and I looked up at the face of Lord James' friend, and my Strategy & Tactics instructor, Robert Angiers. Oh, hell. My belly felt like I'd swallowed frozen rocks. A smile slid across my lips and I widened my eyes. "Well, *hello* Professor. Fancy meeting you here. Do you come here often?" When in doubt, fall back on sarcasm. Works – most of the time.

Angiers' fist jerked my ponytail hard and my neck strained. "What the *fuck*, Angiers."

"Shut up, Abomination. You're disgusting," Angiers said, spitting a bit in my face.

I reverted to my twelve-year-old self with my next comment. "Say it, don't spray it, Angiers. Your breath? It reeks."

The hand not holding my ponytail came up and slapped me so hard my eyes watered, and I bit the inside of my cheek. I sucked in a breath but didn't yell. Instead, I swallowed the blood and smiled. Most would have spat the blood, but I

was a witch. I knew what you could do with someone's blood and there's no way I was voluntarily giving him mine.

"That was fun. So, why am I here?" I said.

Angiers grinned at me and leaned in to hiss in my ear. "You're bait."

"Ooh, scary. Bait for what?"

"Who, you moron," he said. "For your brother or your aunt or whoever else wants to try and rescue your sorry ass."

"And you thought of this all by yourself? Stunning."

He let go of my hair then and slapped the other side of my face. My head rocked with the blow, but at least the ache in my neck eased up.

I let out another slow breath, straining a little bit against the bindings on my arms. My fingers were getting dusky as the plastic cable ties were too tight. If I'd been awake, I would've flexed my muscles so I would have had some room. Well, ifs weren't going to get me out of this. Magic might, though. I just had to get rid of Angiers first.

"Are you the only one here, Angiers? Because I have to pee, and I don't want *you* watching me go."

"Oh, I'll see you to the toilet, but there's no way you can escape anyway. This is a bunker with only one way out."

See? Angiers just proved the 'those who can't, teach' adage was correct. "Well, that's great." I worked hard to sound discouraged. "Could you please untie me so I can pee before you have a puddle to mop up?"

Angiers came around to the front of the chair with a pair of wire snips. He stood to one side and cut one arm and one leg, then walked around the back of the chair and cut the others. I got to my feet and stumbled with the sudden rush of blood, then looked back at him. "Where's the bathroom?"

He pointed to a door in the far left of the room and I hustled as fast as my tingling limbs allowed. Once inside, I realized how correct the guy was. No

windows. A toilet, a sink, and a showerhead with a plastic basin floor and one drain. Looked like the kind of cleanup spot a car mechanic would use, but this one was only about half as nasty as those bathrooms.

I quickly used the facilities, then ran the water to wash up. Hands, face, the tender spot on my neck then I cupped my hands and drank as much as I could hold. The drugs had screwed with me big time and while I was healing, a body still needed food and water to finish the process.

"What are you doing? Taking a sponge bath in there? Hurry up," Angiers yelled.

I found some paper towels and dried off, pulled out my ponytail and quickly braided my hair, then headed back out.

"Thank you. I feel better now," I said.

"I don't care. Sit back down."

"Why? If I can't get out, why keep me tied up?"

Angiers gave me this slimy little smile before he spoke. "Because I like seeing you tied up."

I did an exaggerated whole-body shiver. "Eww, that's disgusting. You're my *teacher* for fucksake." The water and time had cleared the last of the drug out of my system. I was ready to pay him back, but I needed skin to skin contact for this to work.

He stepped close, reached out, and grabbed my jaw. "I'll be teaching you a *lot* of things…"

I'm sure he had more to say, but I took the energy I'd been building, reached up and slapped my hand against the side of his neck. His words ended in a choked cry as his body arched and shook, then hit the floor. The sound of his head thudding on the chair on the way down made me flinch, but at least I knew he was completely out. I searched his pockets, found his cell phone and fresh cable ties. Soon he was hogtied and then tied with a doubled loop to a metal support pole in the middle of

the room. I searched him again and found a bunch of keys and his wallet and took those too.

At the top of the stairs, I carefully pushed the door open and took a look. A room with a cot, a desk, a chair and a laptop monitor that showed Angiers lying on the floor, still tied up. I went over to the computer and with a few keystrokes had the video files dumped to a thumb drive that had been plugged into the side of the laptop. I checked for any other files, moved them to the thumb drive, then put the drive in my pocket. A few more keystrokes and the computer proceeded to delete everything on itself, including the operating system. I closed and locked the door to the downstairs room, then wedged the desk against the door. Worried about what I'd find outside, I slowly opened the metal door and looked out. It was dark and I wondered what time it was until I remembered I had Angiers' phone. A quick look told me it was after ten, and the gravel lot in front of me was empty but for a dark sedan and weak pole light. I hit the key fob and the car chirped, so at least I knew it was Angiers' and I had the keys. It didn't take me long to get in and get the car moving away from wherever the hell I had been. Once I drove out of the lot, I kept going. There was only one way out and I didn't want to be sitting here, dicking around with the GPS if someone came to check on things. I waited until I saw a road with some traffic on it before I pulled over and got the GPS up and running.

Huh. We were less than a mile from Boudreau Manor. Yeah, color me surprised. Not.

I wanted to call Sin and let him know I was okay, but the phone was password locked. Instead, I drove to the corner store about two blocks away and used the last payphone in Belle Cove and called collect.

As soon as the voice announced my name, Sin was yelling into the phone. "If you're fucking with me again, you sonovabitch, I'll rip…"

"Sin…SIN…it's me. Sid."

"Oh, thank gods. Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I stole Angiers' car and am at Jojo's store."

"Wipe it down and leave it there. I'm about five minutes away. I've got your bag and phone. It was left in the locker room."

"Thank you. I'm going to grab some snacks here. I'm starving and shaking, but I've got Angiers' wallet with some cash. I'll leave that in the glove box of his car."

"No, just leave his ID, but bring the rest. We need to figure out what he's been doing and with who. I'm almost there, sis. Get moving."

The call disconnected, but I felt a lot better. I bought some wet wipes, a couple of electrolyte drinks and some food, then went out to wipe things down and lock the car. It had one of those auto-locking trunks, so I pulled the key fob for the car off the ring, wiped it off and tossed it in the trunk before shutting it down. One last wipe and I went to sit on a bench in the shadows and inhale my snacks and drinks. By about the third protein bar, the shaking had slowed. After two electrolyte drinks, I was much better.

Sin pulled up and I slid into the front passenger's seat and into his hug before I could buckle up.

"Don't scare me like that," he said – half teasing, half serious.

"I wasn't planning on it. Let's get out of here, huh? And stop at the drive-thru on the way home? My tank's a little low. I burned a lot of healing and magic."

"What happened?"

"I got hit with a drugged dart and woke up in a dirt floor cinder block bunker, cable tied to a chair."

"Where's Angiers now?"

"I left him tied up and hog-tied to a pole in the bunker." I slid the thumb drive out of my pocket. "I also got all of the videos and info off his laptop before I wiped it of everything, including the OS."

Sin started to laugh, then pulled into the drive-thru. "You're awesome, Sid. Now, what do you want?"

“Two bacon double cheeseburgers, two large fries, chicken tenders, and a large double chocolate shake.” Hey, don’t think that of me. Sometimes a girl just needs her chocolate and bacon. Sin ordered almost the same, but only one of the fries, no chicken, and a strawberry shake. We parked just past the drive-thru and ate. There wasn’t a lot of talk, just stuffing our faces.

I wiped my mouth and settled back with my shake, letting the food finish rejuvenating my body while my brain processed everything.

“He said I was bait for you and Sett. He never mentioned Dad or Grampa Walsh, so I think they’re still a hidden entity in all of this.”

“That’s some good news, I guess,” Sin said and reached out to take my free hand in his. He squeezed my hand a bit and swallowed hard. “I could feel fear, and then anger, but still fear underneath. I couldn’t tell if it was you or me or both of us. I wanted to puke a few times.”

“Well, that was all me,” I told Sin. “You rarely puke.” I slurped the end of my milkshake. Loudly.

“Yeah, I think the last time was after the bar-crawl for our birthday,” Sin said. “I’m glad we still have our connection, Sid.”

“Me too. I knew, somehow, no matter what happened, you were in it with me.”

“I am. Never alone, Sid.”

“Never alone. Let’s go find the Commander and Auntie Sett to fill them in on everything. I also need my laptop so I can figure out what’s on this thumb drive.”

I felt more in control of things than I had in a while. Scary concept, considering I didn’t know how to get us out of this mess.

Chapter Twelve

Sin

Grampa Walsh called a friend of his, a medic, to come check out Sid and make sure she wasn't suffering any aftereffects of the kidnapping and drugging. By the time Sid was done with all of that, we agreed to get some sleep. Better to come at this fresh in the morning.

Now it was morning and Sid had one hand wrapped around her coffee mug, the other scrolling through documents on the screen. She didn't even hear me pour coffee for myself.

"Sid, what do you want for breakfast?" I asked three times before she finally heard me.

"Oh, uh, whatever you feel like making," Sid said, gaze still locked on the computer screen.

"What are you working on?" I asked as I got out the stuff to make omelets.

"Going through the stuff on that thumb drive. I guess it was Angiers' work laptop because there are a bunch of scanned school papers and crap mixed in with some interesting stuff. There are recruitment documents – I don't know what else you'd call them – for about twenty different cadets at the Academy. Species, grades, rankings, scores – they're all listed for each one. It looks like there are six shifters, seven witches, and seven with notations I don't understand."

Grampa Walsh came into the room then and poured himself some coffee. "What kinds of notations?"

Apparently, he'd heard the tail end of the conversation.

"Five are marked as AS and two as M," Sid said.

"Five Aos Sí, or sidhe, and two mythics," Grampa said.

"What are 'shee' or mythics?" I asked as I paused in sautéing mushrooms in the pan.

"Sidhe, it's Gaelic for 'people of the mounds' but, along with Aos Sí, is another term for the fae. Mythics are those descendants of so-called mythical creatures. Griffins, minotaurs, merfolk, gnomes, and so on," Grampa explained as he sipped his coffee.

Sid's mug thumped against the table as she stared at Grampa. I was staring as well. Sid spoke first because I didn't want to burn breakfast, but you can bet I listened hard.

"Wait, what do you mean fae and mythics? There are other things besides shifters and witches? Why are we only hearing about this now? Are there many of them or are they rare?" Sid rattled off her questions while Grampa took another sip of coffee.

"Sin, I'd like an omelet and some toast if you've got some time to whip me up one too," Grampa asked.

"Of course, Grampa. But, what about Sid's questions? Why haven't we ever heard about them before?"

"Well, they are somewhat less common around here. Fae are more common than mythics overall. To have them listing two mythics in the documentation is surprising. Most mythics pass as shifters and most fae pass as witches."

"So, we could know mythics and fae, and have no idea what they really are? Woah," Sid said.

"Do we know any who we've thought were shifters or witches, Grampa?" I asked.

Grampa sipped his coffee and stayed silent. Well, hell. That means yes. I slid an omelet onto a plate, added toast and brought it over to him, then headed back into the kitchen to make the next one.

"Grampa…" Sid said, watching him. She wasn't going to let him go without answering this.

"Sidonie…" Grampa said back as he quirked a brow at her.

"Who do we know that is a mythic or a fae?" Sid said.

Grampa took a few moments to eat some of his breakfast, then put down his fork. "Have you two ever heard the Herne and Danu prophecy?"

"The one carved into that wooden plaque that used to hang over our fireplace?" I asked as I put the last two plates down on the table and joined them.

"Yes, it has been passed down through the original families that came from the Isles. We were taught it as children, as a counting rhyme for jumping rope or bouncing balls," Grampa said.

Sid ate a few bites of her food, then nodded. "Mom used to sing it to us while we were pushed on the swings."

A few minutes of quiet eating before Grampa spoke again. "Sid, give me that notebook and a pen, please."

She slid the items over to Grampa and he wrote quickly, then started to speak.

"Herne, oh horn-ed one
Hunter, watcher, hoof, and horn
Sun and moon shall be reborn
Two of two that act as one
Danu, mother of us all
Bring all that is, into the two
Gifting them with all that lies
In magic under seas and skies."

He put the pen down and slid it back to Sid. “It is a true prophecy, and most in the family believe it is about the two of you.”

“A what?” I said.

“About us?” Sid said.

Grampa raised a hand to silence us. “You’re the first male-female twins born in the shifter line, and the first twins born in the witch line as far back as recorded time.”

We stared at him for a minute, then Sid and I looked at each other. She pulled the written copy close, read it a couple of times, then pushed it over to me. I read it through, then looked back at Grampa. “What has this got to do with if we know mythics or fae?” I asked.

“Bring all that is, into the two – Gifting them with all…” Grampa cleared his throat, then continued. “That means two that have aspects of all the species.”

“How can we have more than just what Mom and Dad brought to the table, Grampa? I’m a pre-med student. I know how genetics works,” I said.

“Unless Mom is not a pure witch and Dad is not a pure shifter,” Sid said.

Grampa picked up his toast and ate it, not speaking. Heh. Great. He was doing the ‘figure it out for yourselves’ game.

“Grampa, I get what you’re doing, but we don’t know which one, or how they both could be anything but what they’ve told us. We’ve not seen Dad shift into anything exotic, nor have we seen Mom do any unusual magic, so you sitting there, silent, is not helping,” I said.

“Your parents do not know they are not pure,” Grampa finally said. “My Bridie was a Mythic from a clan of Sylphs. Your great-grandmother, Margaret Fraser Fortin, was Fae.”

“Sylphs. Air elementals, right?” Sid said.

"Yes. She was exceedingly gifted with the element. Maggie was an incredibly talented witch with the enhanced power of the fae."

"What kinds of power do fae have?" I asked as I started to clean up the dishes.

"They have a connection to the earth stronger than any other beings. They draw their power from all of the elements around them," Grampa said. "Have you ever noticed that your magic is more powerful when you're standing outside, surrounded by plants and trees?"

"Well, yeah, but that's part of being a shifter," Sid said.

"Yes, it is part of being a shifter, but it is the essence of being fae. You two probably didn't notice that it was different, because you two *are* different."

He had a point. We wouldn't know just how different we were because there weren't any others like us that we had ever met. It was one of the reasons Sid and I were so close. No one else understood what it was like to be us as well as *we* did.

"Well, shit," Sid said.

"If the prophecy is such a big deal, how come Mom and Dad didn't know they were more than a shifter or a witch, particularly when Mom was pregnant with us? Or even when we were little kids and you all knew we were going to survive?" I asked.

"Marcel and I, and our wives, thought it would be safer for you kids – and your parents – if we kept that silent until we saw what the two of you developed into and became capable of doing."

"But then Marcel died, you and Grandma Bridie were killed. Well, you know what I mean," Sid said.

"I was more interested in finding out who had been behind blowing up the plane. I got hyper-focused and that isn't a good thing. I failed you two and your parents. I'm so sorry."

"No, Grampa. You didn't fail us. Priorities change over time, and you're here for us now," I said, a hand rested on his shoulder and squeezed.

“Okay, so now we have all of this information,” Sid said. “What do we do with it?”

“Do we go after Lord James?” I said.

“Who is Lord James?” Grampa asked.

“Oh, that’s what we call Grandpa Boudreau,” Sid said.

Grampa laughed for a bit, then leaned forward, elbows on the table, hands folded together. “We’re going to see if we can get *Lord James* to implicate himself. He has quite the following and we don’t need to turn him into a martyr.”

“Yeah, that would suck,” Sid said.

“I’m thinking you have a plan?” I said.

“I do. You two have your graduation ceremony tomorrow, correct?”

We both nodded.

“You will be the loving grandchildren of the current Academy director, something he can be so visibly proud of since they’re graduating top of the class. Then you’ll all go celebrate with food and drinks. I’ll give you something to put in his drink that will lessen his inhibitions.”

“It won’t hurt him, right?” Sin said.

“No, not at all. But it’ll make recording the conversation a whole lot easier. I’m going to show up after you let me know you gave him the drink.”

“Hopefully that won’t give him a freakin’ heart attack, Grampa. He’s an old man, remember?”

“I’m older than he is, Sin. He’ll be fine. Until we can throw his ass in jail.”

“So, we need to make sure that it’s just the three of us at this celebratory dinner, or you’ll spend the whole time dealing with family freaking out that you’re back from the dead,” Sid said.

“We’ll tell him we’re turning over a new leaf,” I said. “That we want him to respect us as graduates and fellow SPD officers, not just as his grandchildren. We’ve

proven ourselves to the whole Academy, we don't need to prove ourselves to him any longer."

"And I'll be as patient as I can be with his misogynistic bullshit. It won't matter that I got the highest scores in decades and am a graduate of the Academy. He'll still find a way to make me out to be less," Sid said.

"His words don't mean anything, Sid. You know this. Don't let the old bastard get into your head like this," I said.

"In this, Sidonie, your brother is right."

"She's also an excellent actress. As long as she keeps her heart out of it, we'll be good," I said.

"I can do that," Sid said. "I have to, so I will."

"I'll have the potion for you tomorrow morning at breakfast. Press your uniforms and be ready for tomorrow," Grampa said as he rose from the table and put his dishes in the sink.

I looked at Sid as he left and let out a slow breath. "Well, fuck."

Chapter Thirteen

Sid

The auditorium was packed with proud families and nervous graduates. I sat beside Sin, my white gloves curled in one hand, my polished boots tapping on the carpeted floor. Sin, on the other hand, was calm as fuck and it annoyed me a little bit. Okay, a lot a bit. The very last thing I wanted to do was deal with Lord James and pretend I still cared. Then again, it wouldn't be pretending. I cared. Even though I had parents, other grandparents, even a brother who loved and admired me – I wanted Grandpa B to see me clearly and respect me. I knew the likelihood of that was slim to none, but the little girl in me wanted her Grandpa to smile at her just once and mean it. It was stupid and I knew it, but it is what it is.

The place was growing quiet as people found their seats and the lights flickered to tell everyone that the ceremony was about to start. I pulled my white gloves on and made sure my hair was smooth and neat in the bun under my cap. Under the uniform jacket, the crisp white uniform shirt and the camisole worn over my bra - hung the charm Mom had given me. As always, it lay against my skin. A glance towards Sin and I saw his bracelet outlined under the cuff of his white dress shirt. At least they weren't going into this dinner with Lord James without protection.

Each row rose and walked to the side steps of the stage. As each name was called, the cadet walked up to James Boudreau, Director of the Belle Cove Supernatural Police Academy, shook his hand, accepted their certificate, saluted the director, saluted the officials in the seats on the stage, then walked down the other side and back to their seat. I made my way up the steps, shook my grandfather's

hand, took the certificate, saluted, saluted, headed down the stairs, then waved to my Mom, Grandma Fortin, Auntie Sett and the rest of them all seated a couple of rows back. They had cheered for me and were now cheering for Sin. As he got down the steps to me, he slapped me on the back and our family cheered even louder.

"We did it, Sid," Sin said, then leaned in and whispered, "I'm so fucking glad we're done with this place."

I couldn't help it, I burst out laughing and followed him back to our seats. Once we sat back down, I opened the stiff padded folder to read the certificate and sighed. "They spelled my name wrong. Again. I am *not* Sedona. You'd think my own grandfather would have made sure my name was spelled right."

"It's not up to him, Sid, you know that. Someone fucked up, it happens. We can order a new one with the correct spelling," Sin said.

"At least he *spoke* my name correctly. That's something." Yes, I knew I was being a whiny bitch. Stress does that to me, I guess.

Sin reached out and squeezed my hand as we watched the rest of the cadets become officers.

I whispered to Sin, "I don't want to go to dinner. I have a bad feeling about it all."

"It'll be okay, Sid. We need to do this for the Commander. He needs answers, and so do we," Sin whispered back.

"I thought of something, Sin. If Great-grandma Bridie was a mythic – then not only Dad but also his brothers Brian and Lord James himself are not pure."

Sin's eyes brightened and he chuckled. "Oh, letting Lord James know this is going to make me *so* happy."

"After we get the information Grampa Walsh needs. Then we can blow up James' world," I said.

"Yeah, good point. If we blow this for the Commander, he'll be pissed. He's waited fifteen years to finally get some answers."

"Do you *honestly* think he's going to say anything useful? Anything incriminating?" I didn't think he would. James Boudreau was too slick to say anything, potion or no potion.

"No, not really, but it's a good shot. If he doesn't say anything, he'll be aware that Grampa Walsh is alive and watching."

"So, either he'll behave, or blow it all up to try and pin it on the Commander."

"Huh," Sin said. "Well, when you put it like that, it doesn't sound like such a great idea after all."

"Yay, someone's truly listening to me. Oh, joy," I said, giving Sin a full dose of my snark.

Just then the last graduate returned to their seat and we all stood at attention.

"Congratulations, cadets. You are now all officers of the Supernatural Police Division!" the Director announced into the microphone and we all cheered. Some threw their hats into the air, but Sin and I needed to make our way to Mom and the gang for photos, then to Lord James for our celebratory ambush, er, I mean dinner.

Photos done, the family sent on their way, we headed to the director's office to meet up with Grandpa Boudreau and find out where we were going to dinner. Sin stopped just outside the door and held up his finger to me to be quiet. The door was open a crack and we could hear Grandpa James speaking. For a moment, we weren't sure if it was in person or on the phone, so we waited – and listened.

"No, they're not here yet. I have a minute." He paused and we realized it was a phone conversation. "Yes, they both graduated, top of their class. Figures. It makes it a lot more difficult to get people to believe they're behind anything less than legal. No, it can't be a stupid crime. Something intelligent, like wire fraud. It'll happen, just give me a couple of weeks. I said, give it time. This is my game, after all. You're

just one of the lucky few to reap some of the benefits. Brian, I swear, if you weren't my brother, I'd have ended you years ago. Just like that meddling father-in-law of mine and our other brother."

It took every ounce of self-control to not smash through the door and end that man with a solid fist to the throat. I reached out and squeezed Sin's arm, the muscles under his uniform gone rigid as steel with the fury running through him. He took a few slow breaths as did I, and I pasted a smile to my face before I rapped a quick beat on the door and pushed my way in. Sin followed behind me and we stood at ease before the Director's desk.

"Yes, well, my grandchildren are here and we're on our way to celebrate their graduation. I'll speak to you later. Good-bye," he said and hung up the phone. "Well, you two. We're going to Sylvan Steak House for dinner. I've made our reservations, so we should get going."

"Yes, sir," we both replied and waited until he moved to the door before we followed. At least the food would be good. The steak house was on the shores of the lake near his cabin and was known for its fine dining.

He used the Hummer limo and we managed polite small talk until we got to the restaurant. I could still feel the anger simmering in Sin. If he didn't calm down, this whole plan was going to go belly up before we even sat down at the table. I excused myself to the ladies' room and texted Grampa Walsh with where we'd ended up for dinner, then came back out and joined Sin and Lord James at the table. As per the usual, appetizers and drinks were already ordered. I'd returned just in time to be able to order my preferred entree before my grandfather ordered me a salad and nothing else. I ordered a nice New York strip with a loaded baked potato and green beans with bacon. When my grandfather arched a brow at my order, I added on a small side salad and gave him a toothy smile. He didn't even blink when Sin ordered the same steak, a cheddar bacon potato casserole, and minted peas.

The drinks were delivered, and James took a sip as his phone rang. He at least had the grace to look embarrassed as he excused himself to take the call. I watched as he walked into the bar lounge and Sin slid the vial out of his jacket pocket. He poured it into James' drink and used the red plastic swizzle stick to mix it up.

We both leaned back with our drinks, waiting for the food to be delivered. It was only a matter of time now. Our meals were delivered before James came back to the table. Sin asked them to hold James' until he returned to the table because he wouldn't want a cold plate. I think we were twelve when we saw him slap a waitress with a full plate that had gone cold, knocking her to the floor.

Sin and I started our meals, enjoying the perfectly medium steaks, fluffy potatoes, and tender vegetables. We were nearly halfway done before James returned to the table. He looked annoyed.

I wiped my mouth with the linen napkin and smiled at him. "Everything okay, Grandfather?"

"Just a small administration issue. It's being handled. I'm sorry it kept me away from our celebration," he said as he waved the waitress over and asked for his plate to be delivered.

As the waitress went to get his food, he lifted his drink and drained it in two swallows. When she brought his food, he held up the glass and asked for another.

"How's your steak, Grandfather?" I asked, watching him take the third bite of the meat.

"It's delicious. Even with them having to hold it for me, it is still one of the best steaks I've ever eaten."

Sin and I stared at each other in shock. That was so very much *not* a typical comment from James Boudreau.

"The potion," I mouthed to Sin and then turned back to Grandpa Boudreau.

"So, Grandfather," I sipped my drink and smiled coyly at him. "What do you *truly* think of me, now that I've graduated from your Academy?"

Sin kicked my shin under the table, warning me to not toy with him too much – but this wasn't toying. I really wanted to know.

"Honestly? I'm very proud of you, Sidonie. You're intelligent, adept, capable, and beautiful. You have your grandmother's chin and lips – and her spirit. I miss Brighid so much sometimes…" his voice trailed off as he stared into his drink, then lifted it to take another swallow.

Since Sin and I were already finished with our meal, James ate about half of his and asked for the rest to be boxed up to take home. The waitress came back with the bag, James had already taken care of the check before we arrived, and we all rose. The maitre'd arrived and asked us to please follow him. Sin just nodded at me, so we made sure James joined us as we entered one of the private dining rooms where a small chocolate cake with "congratulations" written on it was on the table along with a bottle of champagne and four glasses.

Sin locked the door behind us, and James took a seat.

"I must've arranged this and forgot," James said.

"No, I arranged it," said Grampa Walsh as he stepped out of the shadows.

I grabbed James' chair as he bolted to his feet before it could hit the floor. "Liam! But, you're dead!"

"Rumors of my death have been greatly exaggerated," Grampa Walsh replied. "Sin, could you pour the champagne, please?"

"Yes, sir," Sin replied and proceeded to do as asked.

"No. I got the reports. There were no survivors. I paid to make sure of that," James said, then dropped back down into his chair. He looked pale and panicked, and it almost made me feel sorry for him. Almost.

Grampa Walsh pulled a chair over to sit right in front of James. "Who did you pay, James? Who was supposed to make sure we were all dead?"

"Juan Garcia. He was EOD in the Army and said he could make it happen."

“Joey Garcia’s father?” Sin asked, then shut up when Grampa Walsh glared at him.

“Yes, Juan set the explosives and the timers. I had him shot and buried after we got the report you’d all died, so he could never tell anyone.”

I looked over to Sin and he tapped the air in front of his jacket pocket. He was recording the whole conversation.

“Were you behind the attack on your son and his wife?” Walsh asked, voice quiet.

“Which one?” James laughed. “I had Amelia beaten so badly, she’ll never be able to do magic at her fullest strength ever again. Andre will be dead by this time tomorrow. Yes, my son. Biologically, at least. He’s nothing of me, though. He chose a witch and created abominations that have permanently tainted our bloodline.”

The anger I felt at his words had me shaking. I leaned in and hissed into James’ face. “You fucking sick bastard. Your wife was a Mythic. Your kids are all so-called ‘tainted’ too, you son-of-a-bitch.”

Sin gripped my shoulder and squeezed before tugging me back, then whispered in my ear, “Let the Commander handle it.”

I let Sin pull me close to him, then I turned and reached for a glass of champagne. I drained it in one go. After a minute, I put my back to the room and closed my eyes. I needed to breathe, and it felt like there was no air in here.

“That’s not possible,” James said. “My sons are pure shifter, as the Boudreaus have been for centuries. You’re just saying this to upset me.”

Grampa Walsh snorted laughter. “If I wanted to upset you, I’d tell you that you likely have Mythic blood in you too. In fact, the DNA test we did on the twins shows a strong Mythic line, which means it comes from more than just one ancestral lineage. Care to give us a sample, James?” Liam pulled a cheek swab out of his coat pocket and popped the plastic cap. He grabbed James’ face in one hand and squished his cheeks, shoved the swab in, scrubbed it against a cheek, then pulled it

out, released James, capped the swab and put it away faster than I could believe. Even James was surprised.

"Sid, there's a box on the chair over there. Why don't you box up your cake and you and Sin head out? James and I have a few more things to discuss, of a more personal nature."

I found the box and slid it around the cake, then tucked the whole thing into a bag for just that purpose. Sin looked from James to Grampa Walsh and sighed. "You sure you don't need us, sir?" he asked Grampa.

"No, Sin. I've got this. You get that sent where we arranged for it to go and get your sister back behind the wards. Let your grandmother know what was said. Best we don't give Alicia Fortin any reason to want to skin us for keeping secrets."

I laughed at that and kissed Grampa Walsh's cheek before Sin and I left the dining room. We heard the lock click once more after we left.

"You think they'll both walk out of there in one piece?" I asked Sin.

"Yeah, but I wouldn't be surprised if Lord James had a convenient accident sometime over the next few days."

"How are we getting home?" I asked as we stepped outside.

Sin pulled out his keys and hit the fob. The chirp of his car's lock was nearby. "Grampa Walsh had one of his guys drive my car up here after we told him where the dinner would be."

"That's some advanced planning."

"Well, would you want to rideshare from the lake all the way back to the farm? Yeah, me neither."

"True." I fell silent as we got into the car and pulled out of the lot. Once we were on the road, I turned to Sin. "He said Dad would be dead, this time tomorrow. I don't want to wait for the Commander to get everything sorted. I want to find Dad and make sure he's okay. I don't trust Lord James as far as I can spit."

"Mom did say she was in regular contact with Dad, right?" Sin asked.

“Yeah, she did. Let me call her and see if she can get him to come by.” I pulled out my phone and called Mom. She must’ve been sleeping already, so I left a voicemail and texted Grandma Fortin. Instead of a text back, my phone rang.

“Hello, Grandma,” I said.

“Hello, Siddie. Are you and your brother okay? I had a feeling something was wrong, earlier, and now I just feel unsettled.”

“Well, we’ve definitely got something to talk to you about when we get home, but I had tried calling Mom with no answer. We need to get ahold of Dad. It’s urgent.”

Sin’s hands tightened on the wheel, but he stayed silent while I spoke to Grandma.

“Your mother was worn out after the ceremony, so she’s sleeping. I can send a message to your father. What’s going on?”

“I don’t want to get into it on the phone, Grams, but Dad’s in danger and we need to get him somewhere safe before tomorrow night. Can you do that?”

“I can try. We send a message and then hope he gets it. It’s not like he’s got a cell phone on him when shifted.”

“Okay, do your best, Grams, please. We’ll be home soon and will fill you in on it all.”

“Alrighty. Be safe, you two. Oh, and pick up a case of that beer I like, would you? I think I’m gonna need a few.”

Grandma hung up before I could reply, and Sin just shook his head.

“I’ll swing by the store and get her beer. That woman is something else,” Sin said.

I just clutched my phone and stared out the window. Grams wasn’t the only one with a bad feeling.

Chapter Fourteen

Sin

We sat at Grandma Fortin's kitchen table, full bottles of beer in hand and a couple of empties each cluttering up the space, along with a plate of her chocolate chunk cookies. Ever had beer and cookies? Don't knock it, it's pretty good.

I'd just played the recording of James Boudreau confessing his crimes for the fourth time. The first time, Grandma dropped to the chair and stared at us, mouth hanging open.

"How did you get him to…what on earth? What is he saying? He did what?"

We explained about the potion and Grampa Walsh's plan and she blinked at us, then a smile I wasn't sure I felt comfortable seeing on my grandmother's face settled there.

"So, Liam Walsh is back in town and among the living? *Do* let him know I want to see him soonish?"

"Um, yeah," I said and gave Sid a look of 'wtf?' before I reached for another cookie.

"Did you get ahold of Dad?" Sid asked as she stood to collect the empties for the recycling bin.

"No, but I left him a voicemail and left a message with Benny if he happened to go by there," Grandma said.

"I'm worried about what Lord James might have planned," I said. "I feel like I should be out there, trying to find Dad before whatever his father has planned comes into play."

Sid came back after dumping the bottles and leaned against the table. “Maybe we should ask Stumpy if he’s heard from Dad?”

“That’s not a bad idea,” I said.

“Can you still trust Stumpy?” Grandma asked.

“I think so,” Sid said, as I nodded.

“He’s been Dad’s friend for decades now. I can’t see him suddenly turning into an enemy,” I said.

“We never expected our grandfather to be the one that was trying to kill our parents. Or the one who burned down our home,” Sid pointed out.

“Point,” I said.

Grandma finished her beer and burped loudly. “I’ve known James Boudreau was up to no good for a while now, but I wasn’t aware he had gone this dark. To be honest, I wasn’t sure how much of my distrust was racial bias and how much was actual readings. The residue and echoes of behavior cause disturbances that some witches can read. I’m not very good at that, but your mother used to be incredible at it. Not so much now, after the attack.”

I opened another beer and handed it to Grandma. Hey, gotta keep the old battleax lubricated. Best way to keep her talking. No, I’d never say those words out loud. I’d like to be able to father children someday.

“What do you mean, Mom was good at that? Good at what?” Sid asked.

“Reading the energies in the environment around us. It’s not an aura thing, but a ley lines thing.”

“Yeah, Grandma, I think you’re going to need to wait until you sober up to explain that a little clearer,” I said with a laugh.

“Do not mock me, boy. I will make you bald as a cue ball,” Grandma said.

“Naw, you like my hair too much. I’m not mocking you anyway, just saying that five beers make you less than coherent. Particularly on topics with which we’re unfamiliar.”

Grandma leaned on the table, toying with the bottle in her hands. "You two *do* know what ley lines are, right? The global linear lines of power that wrap the planet?"

"Yes, Grandma, we know what ley lines are," Sid said.

"There are a pair of crossing lines right here on the farm. It's why our wards are so strong."

"Huh. I didn't know that," I said.

"Here, in fact, let's do it this way. You're both witches. Close your eyes and send your senses out to the fountain in the front yard. That's where the lines cross."

I looked over at Sid and shrugged, then held out my hands to her. She lay her hands on top of mine and we both let out a slow breath, then closed our eyes. I stretched out my senses and found the fountain and the shimmer of energy that must be the ley lines. "Can you feel it, Sid?"

"Yeah, it vibrates with energy."

"Looks shimmery to me," I said.

"Okay, now run your senses along the lines, like sliding your fingers on a thread. Do you feel any vibrations?" Grandma said.

I could feel Sid sliding along the line in one direction, so I took a ninety-degree angle to her and slid along the other. There were little shimmers along the line. Like the vibrations you'd feel if you were to rest your fingers on a plucked guitar string.

"You two feel the little tremors? Those are emotions. Events. The bright feelings are positives and the dark, heavy feelings are negatives," Grandma said.

"I can feel something like a plucked string," I said.

"Yes, that's a positive," Grandma informed me.

"This is *so* cool," Sid whispered.

We opened our eyes and let go of our hands. "Guess we need to get Grandma drunk more often. She teaches us cool shit," I said – and earned a swat up the back of my head from Grandma.

"Watch your mouth, boy. Irreverent little fucker."

We all laughed at that.

"I know, Grandma, but you love me anyway," I said.

"Sin, you've always been a mouthy little shit, but it's also one of the things I love most about you. You don't let anyone tell you differently."

"At least you don't call him a warlock anymore," Sid said.

"I was an angry, hurt, old woman and I took that out on you two. I'm sorry about that," Grandma said.

"At least, unlike some of our other grandparents, you…" I stopped talking.

"I pulled my head out of my ass and figured out I was only hurting myself? Yes, precisely that," Grandma said.

Sid snorted into her beer and shook her head. "Alright, I need some sleep. It's been a long day and the beer is finally making me sleepy. Come on, Sin, I don't want to walk in the dark by myself."

I got to my feet and leaned over to give Grandma a hug. "Love you, Grams. Sleep well, when you go."

"Love you, too, kiddo. Good night."

* * *

Well, the morning after graduation, I fully did not expect to be out running with my sister just past sunrise, but we had just passed the eight-mile mark and had turned to head back a few paces ago. We were both counting our lucky stars we were part shifter and didn't have hangovers from the day before.

"Have you heard from Stumpy, yet?" Sid asked.

"No, and I sent him a text this morning. After our run, let's shower and grab some food on the way to the station. I want to see him face to face. Can't avoid our questions if he's staring us in the eye."

"Yeah, he can. But he won't. Not now that we're officers."

"Wishful thinking, sis. Stumpy is always going to see us as the kids of his best friend – and little kids at that," I said.

"I'm still worried about Dad and those threats from Lord James. I'm also thinking we need to check in with the Commander and make sure he got out of last night what he needed and is doing okay," Sid said.

"Yeah, and Mom's healing should be going better. Sett said that Jolie had found some new potion blends that seemed to be helping her regain some strength. They couldn't tell yet, though, if they would maintain or fade away."

"Jolie's amazingly good with potions and herbs. Grandma says she may outshine her own skill soon enough. Which means, I trust her to do what's best for Mom," Sid said.

"Even if she'd rather poison us both herself?" I countered.

Sid laughed and nodded, then picked up the pace, making me work for the last mile.

* * *

Showered and changed, Sid drove us to the Belle Cove police station. Our shiny new badges were tucked in our pockets, our service weapons locked in the console safe Grampa had insisted we install in our trucks, our backup weapons strapped to our ankles. No, our backups were not guns. Instead, we carried combo knives that could open a beer or a throat with equal ease.

As we got out of her truck, Sid nodded to the corner of the lot. "There's Stumpy's car. Looks like we might be able to catch him after all."

"Oh, joy," I muttered.

"Why don't you want to talk to Stumpy?" Sid asked,

"Something about the whole thing with him and the original attack at the house has me questioning things."

"Like what?"

"Like why Stumpy didn't call bullshit on the SPD not investigating."

"Probably because he never trusted Grandpa Boudreau and figured he'd tank it if he got involved. Which would have been true since he's the one that ordered Uncle Brian to do it."

"But how did Stumpy know that? How did he know Lord James was involved?" I asked.

"Maybe he didn't *know* and just suspected."

"Yeah, maybe. Then again, who are we to question an experienced cop? We barely know how to open our badge wallets without pinching our fingers."

"Hey, Sin. Have you ever seen Stumpy shift?"

"No. Have you?" Sid said.

"Nope. But he's been friends with Dad since they were toddlers, so he's got to be a shifter. Lord James wouldn't have let a non-shifter be that close to his family," I said.

Sid shrugged. "Maybe he's just private about it. Not everyone likes to shift in packs."

I knew she was talking about her own issues with shifting.

"Benny had said he was a null and had no shifter abilities. Would Lord James have let a null be his son's friend?" I said.

"It's not possible to know if someone's a null until after puberty and the first shift does or does not happen. Maybe, by then, it was a case of just letting it be."

"Maybe. Well, let's go find out what he knows about Dad."

We entered the station and walked up to the counter.

“Can I help you?” the officer behind the counter asked, not looking up until I spoke.

“We’re here to see Detective Clancy. Could you tell him Officers Sidonie and Sinclair Boudreau of the SPD are here to see him?” Yes, I did flash my badge at the guy. What can I say? I still got a little thrill out of the fact the badge was real and not one of those plastic ones they used to give to us as kids.

“Have a seat over there and I’ll let him know you’re here, officers.”

Sid and I took our seats. It was only about ten minutes before Stumpy came out to greet us.

“Hey, kids. What are you two doing here?”

“We wanted to talk, Stumpy. You about off shift?” I asked.

“Yeah, I was just finishing up. Let me grab my gear and I’ll meet you out front,” he said.

Sid got up and reached out to hug him. “It’s good to see you, Stumpy. How about we treat you to some dinner and drinks?”

Stumpy hugged Sid back and patted her shoulder. “Sounds good to me. Give me five.” He turned and headed back through the door and we went out front.

We stood by his car and I looked at Sid. “What was that hug about?”

Sid grinned at me and leaned in to whisper, “I slid some of that tracking potion into his hair. That way, if he changes clothes, it’ll still be there. Just hope he doesn’t shower tonight until later, huh?”

I shook my head. “That, dear sister, was genius.” We both stopped talking as Stumpy joined us.

“So, you good with following us, Stumpy, or do you want to ride with us? We can have a few drinks and drop you home or back here or whatever,” I said.

“Naw, I’m going to need my car later. I’ll follow you. Where did you have in mind?” Stumpy said.

"How about the steak house up the road?" Sid said. It was where we'd agreed to go. Nice enough to sit for a while and have good food, but not too fancy that they wouldn't let us hang out for two or three hours over a meal and drinks.

"You kids treating? That place is a little rich for my wallet," Stumpy said.

"Of course. We invited you, we're paying," I told him.

"Then I'm all in. Meet you there."

Sid and I turned towards our vehicle as Stumpy got his gear stowed and settled into his car.

We were about two yards from the car when Sid whirled around and raced back towards Stumpy.

"Wait! Stumpy!" Sid yelled.

He rolled down his window and looked at her as she ran up beside him, with me a few paces back.

"What's up, Sid?" Stumpy asked.

Sid looked pale and panicked, and I was as lost as to why as Stumpy.

"G-get out of the car," Sid said. "Please. I…uh…*saw* something. Your car isn't safe."

"What are you talking about, Sid?" I said.

"I *saw* his car explode."

Stumpy stared at Sid for a moment, then carefully got out of the car and left the door open. "What did you see, Sid? Was it like a bomb or something else?"

I was grateful at that moment that Stumpy knew us and wasn't assuming Sid had lost it.

Sid closed her eyes and let out a slow breath. "I saw the car skid and then an explosion, so no, I don't think it was a bomb. More like a mechanical failure?"

With his car parked in the far corner of the lot, it was out of the range of the BPD's cameras. I dropped to my hands and knees and peered under the car.

“There’s a puddle under the front end of the car. Some kind of engine fluid or something. I can’t tell with the car over it.”

Stumpy’s car was a classic 1965 Pontiac GTO. The first generation of Pontiac’s GTO line. I gestured to the front seat and Stumpy nodded, so I slid into the car. The keys were in the ignition, so I put my foot on the brake pedal – and it sank to the floor.

“Figured it out. Someone messed with the brake line. Your brakes are out.”

Sid frowned. “But if the brakes are already out, how come I saw it happening anyway?”

Stumpy leaned against the side of the car. “I was supposed to have left two hours ago but got tied up with some paperwork. If I had left when they originally planned it, the brakes would have failed on the ride home.”

I rolled up the window and pulled the keys out to hand to Stumpy. “So, Sid saw the planned failure. The minute you put your foot on the pedal, you would’ve known the brakes were out. But if you’d left earlier, there would’ve been enough fluid to keep them working for a couple of miles.”

Stumpy took the keys, then turned and hugged Sid. “Either way, I’m grateful. So, can I get a ride to the restaurant and then home? I’ll have to call a tow for this.”

“Sure, Stumpy, not a problem. Give me your bag and you can go call it in,” I said.

Chapter Fifteen

Sid

I was still feeling a little unsettled after my – whatever the hell that was. Vision? Brain cramp? I drained the glass of wine and held it out to be refilled. Sin gave me a look and I just wiggled the glass in his direction until he poured.

"Don't argue with the woman, Sinclair. Just pour your sister her wine and tell me why you two wanted to treat me to dinner. I'm sure there was more to it than shootin' the shit with an old family friend."

Sin finally filled my glass and set the bottle down before he turned to Stumpy. "Well, we had a few reasons to get together with you."

I took another swallow of wine and set the glass down. Of course, the waiter had the best timing. I was just about to speak, and he showed up with our appetizers, so I leaned back and stayed silent until he left once more. "We know you've been helping Dad and we need to meet with him."

Stumpy stopped helping himself to the appetizers for a moment, then finished loading his plate. His gaze shifted from Sin to me, then around the room to check for anyone paying too much attention to our conversation. We had chosen a corner table away from the windows and main areas, so it was clear.

"I know you two saved his ass the other day in the forest, but it still took him a couple of days to heal from that. Even with our accelerated healing, he needed the time."

"*Our* accelerated healing?" Sin asked.

Stumpy chewed a stuffed mushroom, then swallowed. "Yes, *our* healing. I may not have all of the shifter gifts, but I do have some of them. Healing, enhanced senses, speed. I just can't change my form." He stabbed a bit of bacon-wrapped cheese, then looked at me. "How'd you find out?"

"About you?" I said as he nodded and ate.

"It was a mix of something Benny said about you being a Null and the fact that Sid and I had never seen you shift," Sin told him.

"We didn't know exactly what a Null was. Still don't, really," I said.

"Null is the most polite term that is used when a child is born of shifter parents doesn't develop the full spread of gifts. Some can shift but don't have the healing or sense enhancements. They don't usually survive very long. Some are like me, get everything *but* the shifting ability. That is more common, simply because genetics tends towards the survivors."

Sin nodded to that. "Those that survive, pass on genes. Those that die, don't."

"And precisely why I will never mate," Stumpy said. "I won't pass this curse on to any kids."

"But the chance of it happening is relatively rare," Sin said.

"But there's still a chance," Stumpy replied. He picked up his beer and drained half of it before speaking again in a rough whisper. "My body cannot complete a shift, but it still *wants* to shift. That torture is not something I'd ever wish on another being."

We all sat in silence for a moment before I laid a hand over Stumpy's. "I'm sorry, Stumpy. That well and truly sucks. So, what the actual hell is going on with Dad? Mom's still too weak to risk getting her upset and no one else seems to know anything." Well, Grampa Walsh knew stuff, but I wasn't going to mention him unless Stumpy did first.

The waiter showed up to deliver our food and a fresh beer for Stumpy. We had cleared out most of the appetizers so I dumped them onto one plate and handed

him the extras so there was room on the table. One thing I could say for shifter metabolism. It needed a lot of fuel. We all waited until he'd left, sorted out our plates and took a couple of bites. Then Stumpy started to talk.

"Your father suspected about ten years ago that something was going on with the Academy and, as such, with the SPD. We talked about it often over beers, but I didn't realize he was running his own investigation until about three years ago when he came to me about this Purist League bullshit."

"We didn't hear about the Purists being organized until a few months ago," Sin said.

"There were always those who wanted more purity within their species. Believing it made them stronger or more powerful. We've not yet been able to find the person *behind* the organization. Or at the head of it. We've figured out some of their members – mostly the talking heads that fundraise and recruit – but not the leaders," Stumpy said.

"You don't have to tell us about the purists wanting purity. We've lived with it our whole lives," I said.

Stumpy nodded as he chewed and swallowed. "And your parents did an excellent job of keeping you alive. Other parents of mixed kids weren't so lucky."

I looked at Sin and he at me.

"Are you saying some kids like us were hurt?" Sin asked.

Stumpy nodded and drank more beer. A heavy sigh slid from him as he spoke, "Three little ones were killed over the past couple of years – that we've learned about. Two in Belle Cove and one in Sorsyville."

"Kept out of the news?" I asked.

"Of course. Accidents all of them, officially. The SPD has them as open murder investigations, but nothing is being done on them," Stumpy said.

"That's no surprise. Not with Lord James running the show," Sin grumbled as he viciously stabbed a bite of steak.

"Who's Lord James?"

"That's what we call our Grandpa Boudreau, ever since we decided he was an asshole for trying to mess with us and hurt our parents. Oh, and burning our house down," I said.

Stumpy didn't even look surprised – which is about what I expected. "Yeah, your father told me it was James and Brian behind it all. Family can be seriously fucked up, eh?"

"Oh, you have no idea," Sin muttered.

I poured us both more wine, then dug into my food. For a few minutes, no one spoke, just ate.

Feeling a little less ravenous, I settled back with my wine and lifted the glass. "To the thin blue line. May we walk the path half as well as you have, Stumpy."

Sin lifted his glass with a "Here, here."

Stumpy lifted his with a wry grin and tapped both of ours. "Welcome to the family. I'd say brotherhood – but it's not just brothers anymore. I'm glad to see more sisters joining the ranks."

We all took a drink and I set my glass down to eat a bit more.

Stumpy had nearly finished his plate when he spoke again. "I did get to your graduation. Stayed way in the back." His gaze met mine. "I stood next to your Dad, and while he was in disguise, there was no disguising the pride in his expression. You both did him real proud."

I choked up a bit and looked down at my empty plate.

"I had hoped he would find a way to see it," Sin said, voice low. "I'm glad he did."

"Now you've been inducted into the family business, is what he said," Stumpy told us. "He called it your 'induction day', not graduation. Knowing what I do about how things changed once I graduated from the BPD academy, he's not wrong. Life will forever be before you were a cop and after you became one."

I cleared my throat and took a swallow of wine. I missed Dad too much. “I’m glad he was there. So, what are his plans with all of this? What can you tell us?”

“Well, James started working with one or two people to slowly shift the focus of the Academy and the SPD to a more racially divisive and non-inclusive mindset. There used to be one shifter and one witch partnered up for every patrol car or beat. That is never done anymore. If a crime is discovered to be done by one race or the other, a matching race team is sent to handle it.”

“That sounds like a guaranteed way to end up with a whole rash of issues. Mistrials, mishandling of cases, special favors based on species, I can’t even think of how many different ways this is bad right now,” I said.

Stumpy nodded. “If a case starts out with the BPD and we find out it’s supers, we’re not supposed to share the case files or information, per the order of the SPD. Supposedly it would taint the findings and our work isn’t as detailed as the SPD officers.”

“Which is a bunch of bullshit,” Sin said.

“It is,” Stumpy agreed. “A bunch of us still make copies of our files and share them, because we know most of the SPD cops don’t agree with, or approve of, the bullshit rules.”

“Well, that’s comforting,” I said, then finished my wine. “Your driving, Sin. I’m finishing this bottle.”

Not that the wine would impair me for long, but I think the vision thing still had me a bit shook.

Sin smiled. “No worries, sis. Drink away.” He turned back to Stumpy. “Do you know who else Dad is working with?”

I saw the hesitation and grinned. “Is one of those he’s working with, someone we thought was gone?”

The relief was easily visible as Stumpy nodded. “I only learned about it about a year ago. He said he caught up with you two a few months back?”

Sin nodded. “Near scared the piss out of me when he showed up next to my truck. I thought for sure I was hallucinating.”

“Definitely one of the best *ghosts* we could have wanted in this fight. Things have kicked into high gear since he came back. Now that you two are officers, it should be interesting.”

“Yeah, we’re still waiting for our assignments. Some of the class got them already, but a lot more are still waiting,” I said.

“Considering their partnering rules, we’ll probably get paired up with each other. Which is kind of what I’m hoping for, honestly. Until things are settled out, I wouldn’t feel safe with some stranger as a partner. And before you argue the point, yes, I know we won’t have a more experienced officer to learn from if we do it this way,” Sin said.

“But we do have more experienced officers we can call on for help and advice,” I said.

“Very true,” Stumpy replied. “It’s not as good as having experience on the scene, but you can always call on me if things get sticky. Your Aunt Sett, too. She’s one hell of an officer. Although, she’s probably not as available as you’d need, seeing as she’s teaching and all.”

“Having her around helped a lot when things got hairy at school. We had tried to live in the dorms, but the hazing was over the top. It was disturbing the other students and making it tough for them to learn, so we moved back to the farm and just commuted,” Sin explained to Stumpy. “She didn’t actively step between us and them so as not to be accused of favoritism, but she did bitch slap the idiots who openly tried shit right in front of her.”

Stumpy chuckled. “If they were dumb enough to do that, they deserved it. I heard that you two helped dig out some of the Purists from the cadets. That’s a good start.”

“It’s something, anyway. We were the perfect bait to drag them out of the shadows. Whether they were shifter or witch, they couldn’t resist hassling us,” I said.

“I see why you two want to stay paired up, then. If they were coming after you at the Academy, they’ll try twice as hard out on the street.” Stumpy finished his beer and leaned back. “That was an excellent meal, thank you.” A glance at his watch and he sighed, “But I need to head back shortly. I’ve got a few things I still need to handle tonight and see if they can fix my car or do I need to take a loaner from the station.”

Sin got up to handle the check and came back with two bags, handing one to Stumpy.

I laughed. “No one gets out of this without dessert. You can take it home and have it later.”

Stumpy chuckled and leaned over to kiss my forehead. “Don’t let anyone tell you different, Siddie. You’re still a sweet one.”

Sin jokingly made a gagging sound and I swatted his arm.

“Keep it up, big brother, and you won’t get your dessert. I’ll eat them both.”

It didn’t take us long to get Stumpy back to the station and see him safely to the garage for the loaner car. I got out of ours long enough to go lay a hand on his and make sure everything ‘looked’ safe. I nodded to Sin, climbed back in and settled in to nap while he helped Stumpy shift stuff from his car to the loaner.

“Is your sister alright?” Stumpy asked Sin. His gaze shifted from the bag he’d just put in his trunk to Sid’s head against the window.

“It’s been a rough few months for both of us. We went from planning on med school and law school to fighting our way through police academy training and worrying if our parents were going to survive to see us graduate.” He looked over to where I appeared to be asleep. “Losing the house we grew up in was harder on

her than she let on. The farm is nice and all, but it's not home. I'm not sure where that will end up being, but right now, we don't have one."

Stumpy reached out and gripped Sin's shoulder. "You two are strong. You'll get through this. Just remember, you've got people out here that love and support you."

Stumpy may be what we called him, but he was Sin's height and about half again his width. Broad shoulders, solid frame, and thick reddish-blond hair. Bright hazel eyes and a mustache-goatee combination that made him look like an older Michael Fassbender.

Sin gripped his forearm where it hovered near his chest and squeezed once. "I appreciate it more than you know, Stumpy. Just…tell Dad we have to sit down with him and make sure we're all on the same page. I'd rather be working towards helping him instead of possibly inadvertently screwing something up."

"I understand, Sin, and I'll make sure to get him the message. Be safe out there," Stumpy said as he let go and climbed into his car.

Sin watched as he drove away, then got into our car and started it up.

"He's one of the good ones," I said, voice quiet.

"Yeah, he is. We're lucky he's on our side."

"I wish there was a way to fix it so he could shift."

"Well, if anyone can figure it out, it'd be you. Rest, sis. I'll get us home safe."

Chapter Sixteen

Sin

The next morning, we woke to the sound of someone knocking on our *bedroom* doors, not the main door downstairs.

"Get up, you two! I've got breakfast, coffee, and some news to tell," Grandma Fortin called out as she headed down the stairs.

I grabbed my robe and headed into the bathroom before Sid could steal it, and got myself showered. By the time I got dressed and downstairs, Sid was at the table, shoveling Belgian waffles with strawberries and whipped cream into her mouth.

"There had better be some of that left for me," I warned her.

"Don't worry, Sinclair. I made plenty. Sit yourself down and I'll take care of it," Grandma said.

"Something must be happening if you're over here, making us breakfast and serving us, too," Sid said, her worried gaze on Grandma.

Grandma put a plate and mug in front of me, but I kept my gaze on her face. "Grandma, what's going on?" I asked, my voice soft.

She held up a finger, poured herself a cup of coffee and sat down at the little table with us. "Melly isn't getting stronger and I'm out of ideas. I got her to agree to go to a specialist in the city."

My mug hit the table a little hard and I took a breath. "Do you need us to go with you? What can we do to help?"

Sid reached out and took one of Grandma's hands. "Tell us about this specialist."

“The man was Evelyn Rue’s mentor when she first started. Abraham Ricker, a German apothecary, and witch. He’s very old, even for our kind, and no longer travels. Evelyn got him to agree to see your mother, so we’ll be taking her there later today. It’s about a three-hour trip, and we don’t want to overdo it for Melly, so we’ll be staying a day or two at the minimum. If Doctor Ricker wants to keep her for treatment, then Jolie and Evelyn will stay with her and I’ll come back.”

“How are you traveling?” I asked.

“We’re taking Evelyn’s medical van. It has a bed in the back that has been spelled to keep the patient from feeling the bumps and sways of travel. It also has all of the medicines if there is any kind of emergency.”

My heart chilled at the idea of my mom having some kind of emergency on the trip. “Does Evelyn think this trip is a huge risk or something?”

“No, but it’s better to plan for things we don’t expect than to be caught by surprise,” Grandma said.

“I thought she was doing better?” Sid said.

“She was, or so it seemed. For about a week, she was stronger. Just after your graduation, though, she seemed to relapse.”

“Did her coming to our graduation cause her to weaken?” I asked.

Grandma reached out to take my hand, squeezing it lightly. “No, darlin’. That’s not what caused this at all. She was fine for a day or so afterward, and then one morning she just didn’t feel up to getting out of bed. Jolie gave her a couple of potions that should have helped, but they didn’t do much. I’ve tried everything I know of, and Evelyn has done her best, but this is puzzling us both and we’d rather ask someone who knows more than both of us put together. It’s either that, or we keep going with the trial and error method. I don’t think Melly is strong enough for much more error.”

“Oh, Grams,” Sid whispered and slid out of her chair to hug her.

“What do you need us to do while you’re gone?” I said.

“Sett will be at the main house instead of her cottage, making sure the wards are kept up and answering any business calls. I want the two of you to work with her on keeping this place buttoned up and safe.”

“We can do that, Grandma. Don’t worry about things here. We haven’t even got our assignments yet, so we have the time and the resources,” I said.

“Good. Good,” Grandma said and patted her cheek. “Now get back in your seat and eat those before they get cold. I’m going to see if my waffles are done and join you.”

There was a smile on her face, but her eyes still looked shadowed with worry. As Grandma sat down with her food, a knock sounded at the back door.

“I’ll get it,” Sid said as she got up with her empty plate. “I’m done eating anyway.”

I waved my fork at her, my mouth full of perfect waffle and homemade whipped cream.

Sid came back through to the kitchen with a mischievous grin on her face. “Hey, look who just showed up. I’m going to make him some waffles, okay Grandma?”

Grandma turned in her chair as I looked up to see Grampa Walsh following behind Sin.

“Hey, Grampa,” I waved, then watched Grandma move faster than I’d seen her do in a while. “Sidonie, you get out of that kitchen. *I’ll* make sure Liam Walsh gets a good breakfast. It’s my recipe, after all.”

Sid raised both hands and backed away from the counter. “All yours, Grandma. Let me just get the coffee and a mug.”

Sid grabbed the coffee and mug for Grampa, then sidestepped out of the way as Grampa went up to Grandma and took her hand.

“Alicia Fortin, you’re more beautiful now than the day I first met you,” Grampa said and kissed the back of her hand.

Grandma blushed and, I swear, batted her lashes at him. "Liam Walsh, you old rascal. Sit yourself down and visit with the kids. I'll get you some breakfast if you've got the time?"

"I'll always have time for whatever you're dishing up, Alicia," Grampa flirted right back and winked at her before he released her hand and came to sit with us.

My mouth snapped shut when Grampa gave me a look and I just grinned at him.

Sid handed him the mug of coffee.

I murmured, "I need to take lessons from you, Grampa. That was masterful."

"Watch it, boy, or you'll be dating my bulldog, Suzie," Grampa said. "And she's been spayed."

I almost snorted my coffee. Almost. It was a near thing.

Sid leaned back in her chair and sipped her coffee. "The way my love life has been lately, that's some seriously interesting action right there."

We all groaned at that, and Grampa laughed. "Sinclair, once the ladies see you in your uniform, you'll be just fine."

"And it will end any dating life *I* might have. Men don't like dating lady cops," Sid said.

"Good," said both me and Grampa Walsh.

Sid did the mature thing and stuck her tongue out at us both. Grandma came over and set a plate with perfect waffles, strawberries, and whipped cream in front of Grampa.

"Here you go, Liam. Would you like anything more?" Grandma asked.

"Just your company, Alicia. Please, sit with us while I enjoy this amazing breakfast?"

Grandma slid into the chair next to Grampa and smiled up at him once more. "You're looking mighty fine, Liam. Seeing anyone?"

Grandma timed that question just as Grampa was about to swallow a bite of food. He choked a little but managed to keep from spewing waffle across the table. After a moment, he took a sip of coffee and smiled at Grandma. “No, Alicia. I’ve not been seeing anyone in a while. It’s a little difficult to date when you’re in hiding and letting people, including your family, think you’ve been dead for fifteen years.”

Grandma smiled at that. “Well, then. It’s a good thing you’re not in hiding any longer, isn’t it? I’m going to be taking Melly to the city today, but I should be back in three or four days. How about we get together this weekend for dinner and a movie?”

I looked at Sid and shook my head, then got up with my dishes. I could still hear from the other side of the kitchen as I rinsed and put the dishes in the dishwasher.

Grampa gave Grandma a thoughtful look, then wiped his mouth with a napkin and leaned in towards her. “Are you cooking or are we going out?”

“Which would you like more?” she replied.

“I’ve always been partial to good home cooking and haven’t been able to enjoy much of it the past few years. I’ll bring the wine and dessert and you do the meal?”

“Sounds like a plan, Liam. Pot roast still one of your favorites?”

“Still one of my favorites, Alicia.”

“Then I’ll see you Saturday evening around six. Bring a bold red, it will complement the meal perfectly,” Grandma said.

Grampa took her hand, kissed the back of it once more, and smiled at her, “As you wish.”

Grandma got up and kissed Sid on the cheek, brought her mug into the kitchen to give to me and patted my back. “You kids behave and help your Aunt Sett. I’ll take care of your mother.”

“Thanks, Grandma,” Sid said.

“Call us if you need us, Grandma,” I told her and watched her leave.

Sin didn’t say a thing, just leaned in and high-fived Grampa.

I shook my head and finished cleaning up the kitchen.

* * *

Sid

Grampa stayed and helped Sin stack some firewood and move a few boxes around in the storage barn. Dad had wanted some of his things and Grampa was going to make sure they got to him.

Then I cleaned up at the cottage and did some laundry before my restlessness had me out running around the farm. I didn't want to go into the woods as much anymore. Not after the IED traps had been set. I kept my route to the fields and while I might pass the same scenery once or twice, at least I could see what was around and in front of me.

My mind was spinning. I felt like I was dealing with information overload and as a result, I was missing something. When I had a problem to work through, I had a process that usually worked. I would do something unrelated to the issue at hand – like go for a run or play a game on the computer – and my brain would work it out in the background. This time? It wasn't working. I didn't have all the information I needed to figure it out.

Dad, Grampa Walsh, Auntie Sett, Stumpy, and now Benny, were all working to take down the Purist League. Lord James and Angiers were at least two of the active Purist members. There were a few of the low-level idiots we'd got out of the Academy that were still around and probably doing scut work or something for the group, but we still needed to figure out who the power players were. Other than James Boudreau.

I got back to the cottage to shower and change. When I stepped into the kitchen for a bottle of water, Sin and Grampa Walsh were seated at the table.

"Hey, guys. What's up?" I asked, then drained half the bottle of water before I sat down to join them.

Sin handed me an envelope. "This is what's up."

I opened it to find a summons to Director Boudreau's office for tomorrow morning. "No other information? Just a summons?"

"Just a summons," Sin replied.

"What is this all about?" I said.

Grampa Walsh sat, hands wrapped around a mug of coffee. "It means he's ready for the next phase of his plan. Don't let him get inside your heads, understand?"

For some reason, Grampa looked right at me as he said that.

Chapter Seventeen

Sin

Sid and I were in full formal dress uniform as we stood at attention in front of the director's desk. On the other side of the desk sat the father of our father, James Sinclair Boudreau. I had never wished more to have been named for someone else.

He made us stand there for almost ten minutes before he looked up from the papers on his desk. "Officer Boudreau, you and your sister have been called here today based on an investigation that brought some interesting things to light."

I could feel Sid's fury rising as he relegated my fellow officer to just my *sister.* It wasn't our turn to speak, however, so we both stayed silent and still, our eyes focused straight ahead at a spot on the wall just above eye level.

James tapped a thick folder on his desk. "This here report states that you and your sister cheated your way through your Academy training and, as such, do not deserve the ranking of an officer."

Now *my* fury surged. I shifted my gaze to meet his eyes and glared.

"What have you got to say for yourself, boy?"

"Your investigation is incorrect. We did not cheat," I said, voice sharp.

"Well, my investigators are some of the best. If they say you cheated, then you cheated. I mean, sure, you two are smart. That just means you're smart enough to fool everyone and get away with cheating, doesn't it?"

"Lies," Sid hissed through clenched teeth.

"I'm not talking to you, girl. Keep your tongue still." His gaze came back to meet mine and I could see just how much he was enjoying this. "You're both suspended,

pending further investigation. That aunt of yours, Cosette Fortin, is also suspended. Seems she was assisting the two of you in your cheating scandal."

I leaned in and rested my fists on the top of his desk, eyes locked to his. "I will say this once, James Boudreau, so listen well. Your days are numbered. You may hold the cards now, old man, but your castle is about to crumble."

He smiled and it took every ounce of control to keep from planting my fist in his face. "Threatening a superior officer? That's another charge against you."

I shrugged. "If I'm not an officer, then you're not my superior and I can say whatever the fuck I want." I turned then and Sid and I walked out of his office.

Behind us I could hear him yelling, "I'm not done talking to you two! Get back in here."

We ignored him, walked past his secretary, and out of the building. Neither one of us spoke until we were in the car.

Sid rested her cap on her lap as she peeled off her gloves. "I can't wait until he's pissing himself in fear. Honestly? I wouldn't feel bad if he ended up dead."

I pulled the car through the gates and headed back to the farm. "The fact that his evil blood runs through my veins makes me want to get a transfusion."

"There's some good blood in our genetics, Sin. It sucks that we have this asshat in there too, but it's a small drop in comparison to the good."

"It's hard to understand why you're not raging right now," I said.

Sid smiled, a cold, brittle thing. "Payback's a bitch and I am looking forward to being her handmaiden."

We got home, changed our clothes and hung up our uniforms. It would not be the last time we wore them. We both swore to that before we got into the house.

I started cooking while Sid sat at the table amid a stack of books and notepads.

"What are you working on, Sid?"

"I'm going over some law books and criminology books. I want to see if there is any precedent for what James is trying to pull and how we might fight back using the system."

"You're wasting your time," I said. "He isn't doing this within the system, so fighting him within it won't work. We need to publicly embarrass or humiliate him. We need to show everyone how evil he truly is."

Sid put her pen down and rested her chin on her hands. "That's great, and we'll do that. But we also need to lock it down so neither he nor anyone else, can ever do this again. That's where the law comes in."

"Okay, I can see that. Although…"

My words were interrupted by a pounding at the door. I glanced at Sid, turned the flame down under the pot of pasta I was cooking, and headed to the door to answer it. Another round of heavy thuds hit the door before I could open it. I pulled it open to reveal Auntie Sett standing there, fist raised, about to pound the door again.

"Come on in, Auntie," I said.

"About time you answered the damned door. That bastard has a lot to answer for, I'm telling you," she snarled as she pushed past me into the house.

"I assume you're talking about our *beloved* Director?" Sid said from her seat at the table.

Sett paused in her rampage to blink at Sid. "Oh, hell. What did he do to you two?"

"Accused us of cheating, with your help, and told us we were no longer officers," I said.

"With my help," Sett hissed. "That explains some of what he said. It seems he thought we spoke after you left him because he was acting like I already knew what he was talking about."

“What happened, Auntie?” Sid asked. “Come on, sit. I’ll get us coffee or beer or whatever you want.”

“It’s lunchtime, beer is good. Want me to order pizza?” Sett said.

“No, I was cooking already. Let me get that finished up and we can talk this out,” I said.

Sett sat down at the table and picked up one of Sid’s books. “Criminal law. Doing some studying? Or research?”

Sid brought the beer back to the table and started to clear it so we could eat. “Research. I want to find a way to pass laws so no one else can do this again.”

“That’s ambitious of you,” Sett said as she handed the book to Sid.

I dished up three bowls of pasta with tomato and meat sauce and set them on the island. A sliced loaf of French bread with butter and a small salad rounded out the meal. Sid finished clearing the table and set the food out while I carried the salad in and we all took a couple of minutes to eat.

Sett dipped her bread in the sauce and took a bite, washed down with a swallow of beer before she spoke again. “The Director has put me on probation, which is basically a suspension with pay. I can still get on campus and access my office, but my classes are being handled by another teacher and I had to turn in my badge and gun.”

“And all he told you was that you supposedly helped us cheat?” Sid said.

“That was the main point he brought up. He rambled a bit about how he didn’t understand how I’d managed to stay on staff at the Academy for so long. That it must’ve been because I was a Fortin that my pathetic skills as a witch and a trainer were allowed to be passed on to students.”

I could tell that Sett was more angry than hurt by the words, but there was a trace of bitterness there.

“Auntie, you have been repeatedly awarded the best trainer title by the cadets for the past, what, ten years? You are an excellent trainer and a much better witch

than some of the purely witch-training teachers there. Don't let that asshat get inside your head. That's what Grampa Walsh told us, and it goes for you too," I said.

Sett looked down at her food and took another bite. "He's good at it, though. Getting into our heads."

"Yeah, he is," Sid said. "He pushes my buttons all the time. When he called us into his office, he addressed Sin as Officer Boudreau and me as 'his sister'. As if I weren't even worthy of being called an officer. He's always hated that I exist."

"Aren't you being a touch dramatic?" Sett asked Sid.

"No, she's not. He said as much to her face the last time we were at the manor. He would have been happiest if she were a boy, but otherwise, he'd rather she was dead," I said.

Sett looked from me to Sid and shook her head. "Walsh suspected that James had psychopathic tendencies. I didn't realize how accurate he was."

"He has no emotion that seems true. He can fake it well, but it's like turning a switch off and on. We saw it the last time we were at the manor. He was sobbing into his hands, saying he was worried about our father, then shifted gears so fast his tears were still wet on his cheeks as he told us how useless we were," Sid said.

I ate the rest of my pasta and started on the salad. I only heard about half of Sid and Sett's conversation as I ran the information around in my head.

"So, what do you think, Sin?" Sett asked.

"Huh? I'm sorry, I was thinking."

"About what?" Sid asked.

"Just all the bits and pieces we've gathered so far. We don't have enough to figure out our next steps against Lord James and his crew."

"No, you don't. Not yet," Sett said. "But I know who has more information. Tonight, meet me in the storage barn next to the one that has your stuff in it. I'll leave it unlocked. Come around ten."

I looked at Sid and she nodded, so I turned to Sett. “Alright, we’ll be there. Should we bring anything?”

“Come armed and leave your phones behind.”

* * *

Sid and I ate a light dinner and dressed in dark jeans, black hoodies, and our training boots. We were each armed with a handgun and a silver dagger. Our cell phones were silenced and tucked away in our bedrooms. I left a light on over the stove and we locked up the cottage and left. It was just shy of two miles from our cottage to the barn Sett had mentioned, so we took one of the ATVs and rode up to the end of the barn road and left it in the shadows. There were security lights on each barn that were motion detection activated, so we made our way along the back of them until we got to the right place. A side door was cracked open, revealing a thin line of pale light from inside. I got up next to it and whispered, “It’s us.”

Sett opened the door a little wider and gestured for us to come in, then closed and locked the door behind her. Crates and equipment were piled up in rows, and Sett led us down one row, around the end of two more, then into a cleared space in the middle of the barn near the back. No windows meant no one could see us, and if someone opened the doors, we would be hidden by all of the stuff.

In the space was set a couch, a table with four chairs, and a power strip that ran a computer, a couple of lamps, a mini-fridge and a microwave. I didn’t see much of that because of one of the men seated at the table. “Dad!” I choked out and stepped over to him to hug him.

He hugged me tightly and then turned to hug Sid. “You kids have done so well. I am so proud of you both.”

“We’ve missed you, Dad,” Sid said.

Grampa Walsh stood from his seat at the table. “Sett, grab that other chair, would you?”

Sett pulled another chair over and we all sat at the table. Mugs of coffee sat amid notes and maps spread out on the scarred wood surface.

Sid and I sat on either side of Dad, and Sid kept a hand on his arm. Sett poured everyone some coffee and set a package of cookies on the table.

“Dad, have you been staying here? In the barn?” Sid asked.

“Some of the time, yes. Mostly, when your mother is at her weakest. Now that Alicia, Evelyn, and Jolie have taken her to the city, I can focus wholly on this project and not worry about her.”

“Andre and I have been staying in a hunting cabin about ten miles into the state forest, in the section that’s just starting to grow back after the wildfire two years ago. No one goes hiking or hunting there as it’s not safe to hike there yet and nothing worth hunting has returned,” Grampa Walsh said.

“And we stay here when we need to be close to town,” Dad said.

Grampa looked at Sid and me. “Before we go further, I want you two to know this. You are *still* officers in the SPD, and you are now under my command. I never relinquished my command, even though some could argue that my being assumed dead relinquished it for me. That was never written into our codes and rules, so I’m still the Commander, and you are now answering to me. Well, to Cosette – she’ll be your handler. Your father and Cosette both work for me.”

I let out a breath I didn’t know I had been holding and let my shoulders relax. “Thank you, Gr…er…Commander. I appreciate it.”

Sid grinned at him and lifted her chin. “Acceptable, Commander.”

“Smartass,” he muttered at Sid, then winked at her.

Sett reached into a bag on the floor and pulled out two badges and slid them to Sid and I. “Here are your badges and IDs.”

I opened it to find something different than what I'd turned in to Lord James. It still said Supernatural Police Department and my name and photo, but above it was stamped Special Operations. "What's this?" I asked. "Special Ops?"

Sid flipped her badge over to show me that it was the same.

"You're part of an elite team that takes orders only through Cosette, Andre or me. There are a few others, and you'll eventually meet them," Grampa said.

I looked at each of the faces around the table and something inside me shifted. This was more than just a badge and a job, more than just a way to help our parents. This was a calling. A sacred trust. The men and women sitting here with me trusted that I would have their backs as much as I had theirs. Did this mean I would never go to medical school? No, not considering how long our lifespans could be. But it meant that, for the foreseeable future, I was no longer a potential med student, but an officer of the law. My gaze turned towards my twin and Sid looked back. I saw a similar shift in her posture and expression and gave her a crooked smile. "Plans changed again, eh sis?"

Sid gave me a nod. "Life is change, brother."

Dad reached out and gripped a shoulder on each of us. "You two impress the hell out of me. Now, let's get down to business." His hands returned to wrap around his mug and he took a sip. "As you already know, Angiers is part of the Purists, along with my father, James. We've identified a couple more. Your Criminal Law professor, Suzette Lang and her son, Samuel."

"He's one of the ones we got thrown out for cheating," Sid said.

"And reinstated after you two were accused of cheating. He's back in class and will be graduating next semester," Grampa Walsh said.

"At least, that's what he thinks," Sett replied, and she and Grampa laughed.

Dad leaned in. "Another member of the Special Ops team is Keith Roberts. He has been working with Liam since before the attack on the house. He is undercover and embedded inside the Purist League as one of their third-tier lackeys." He

reached into the pile on the table and pulled a folder towards himself, then slid a photo out of it. A guy about our age with curly dark hair and light brown eyes smiled up from the photo. His skin was lightly tanned and he wore a mustache and goatee kept neatly trimmed and short. “Make sure you remember what he looks like so you don’t accidentally shoot him.”

Grampa Walsh snorted amusedly. “Yeah, please don’t shoot your fellow officer. You won’t like the paperwork.”

“When would we see him to shoot him?” Sid asked as she memorized the image.

“The rough outline of the plan we have right now is for Keith to let us know when the next Purist League meeting is and go in wearing a micro camera and recorder. We’ll be outside nearby, recording and watching the whole thing,” Dad said.

“If anything goes wrong, we’re the ones that will be pulling him out of there and arresting the leaders. We hope,” Sett said.

“So, for now, we train, plan, and wait to hear from Keith Roberts?” I asked.

“That’s it. Oh, and be sure to go into town with your sister tomorrow and make a scene about not being officers any longer,” Grampa said.

“Huh?” I said.

“Whine and complain or whatever you kids do, to show your displeasure about how you’ve been treated,” Grampa said, a grin slowly growing on his face. “Play the parts James has put you in.”

“Act like I’ve never taught you to behave,” Dad said.

“Ah,” Sid said. “I get it. Make them think we’re whiny little shits so they don’t know we’re still SPD and won’t be considering us much of a threat.”

“Exactly,” Sett said.

I laughed and shook my head. “Oh, they’re going to think we’re the worst thing since Cherry Marshall threw a fit at the ice cream shop.”

Sid slapped a hand over her mouth and snorted laughter.

Sett and Grampa looked confused and Dad just slid a hand down over his face and groaned.

"Cherry Marshall wanted Sin to take her to the homecoming dance when he was sixteen. Sid, Sin, and I were at the ice cream parlor and Miss Marshall came flouncing over to the table and announced to Sin that he *would* be taking her to the homecoming dance, and he *would* be wearing a sky-blue tie to match her gown. Oh, and that he would bring a white rose corsage. Sin didn't even stop eating his ice cream. He just paused between bites, looked right at Cherry and said, "No way in hell." then went back to eating. Sid burst into laughter. Miss Cherry stomped her feet, screamed, and proceeded to flip over tables on her way out the door, spraying the place with desserts and drinks. The manager ran out and grabbed her by the arm, dragged her back into the shop, called her mother, and made the girl clean up the mess she'd made. When Mrs. Marshall showed up, she paid the damages, slapped Cherry hard enough to make her head spin, and told her she was working off the cost of her temper tantrum over the next two months' worth of weekends by weeding and doing yard work."

By the time Dad was done telling the story, everyone was laughing.

Sid added, "The best part was that Cherry got so sunburned from working in the yard, she wore that white cream on her nose and lips at school and everyone called her 'whipped cream and Cherry' for the next two years."

We sat and talked and laughed for about another hour before Dad got up and hugged us both. "We need to head out. It takes Liam and me a while to get to the cabin and we go in shifted form. You two get back to the cottage safely and I'll see you in a couple of days."

Hugs all around and I watched Dad head out first, then Sid and I left. As we made our way back to the ATV, we were both silent and on high alert. A yip in the distance told us Dad had checked the route back to the cottage and we were cleared to go.

We locked up the ATV and headed to bed. The next few days were going to be interesting.

Chapter Eighteen

Sid

Sin and I slept in after our eventful evening. Instead of cooking, we decided to start Operation Whinygits at the diner in town. Moe's Diner had the best corned beef hash in the state, so we were sure to have a decent audience. I chose a table in the center of the room and dropped into the chair with a heavy sigh. Sin kicked his chair out a bit and slouched into the seat. People were already starting to look and there were a few whispers. Shifter hearing being what it is, we could hear everything they were muttering to each other.

The joys of living in a somewhat tight-knit community of paranormals is that news travels fast. By the time Sin and I had driven out of the Academy the other day, news of our status and situation had spread to town. Now that a day or more had passed, *everyone* knew what had happened. Those who heard one version of the story were sharing it with those who had heard another version, making the whole thing grow beyond its reality.

A waitress came over and smiled at my brother. "What can I get you two?" I checked her name tag. Missy.

"I'd like the corned beef hash, fried potatoes, three eggs over easy and rye toast. Also, bring us a pot of coffee? Thanks," I said.

Missy never looked at me, kept staring at Sin, but she did write my order down.

Sin gave her one of his panty-melter smiles but it never reached his eyes. "Missy, I'd like exactly what my sister ordered, but a double order of the potatoes and I'd prefer sourdough toast."

Missy nearly tripped over her own feet as she hurried off to place the order and I arched a brow at Sin. “Flirting with the waitress? Isn’t it a bit early for that?” I said.

“What else have I got to do? Director Asshat, or should I say *Grandfather* has deemed us ineligible for his precious posse. I can’t go to med school this year, that’s all fucked up because Lord James decided we should go through his perfect Academy. We *ace* it and because we won’t dance to the tune he likes, we get screwed? Yeah, fine. We got his money, I’m gonna play,” Sin said.

Missy returned with the coffee, poured two mugs, set the carafe down on the table and smiled at Sin. “I get off at three. I’d be happy to play.”

Sin gave Missy a slow up-and-down perusal, then smirked. “Sure, if I don’t find a better toy by then, I’ll come back and play with you.”

I kicked him under the table and gave him a look that said he’d gone too far, but Missy didn’t even notice. She giggled and slipped Sin a scrap of a receipt that obviously had her number on it.

A table two spots away had two women seated there, whispering. Looked like a mother and daughter, out for breakfast. Mom and I used to like to go out together. I missed that. We would be doing that again when she got stronger, or so I promised myself.

“He’s handsome, Mom, and he’s always been nice to me,” the daughter whispered.

“Pretty face, ugly insides, Penny. Boys like that only want one thing from pretty girls like you,” her mother replied.

“Well, I’d let him have it,” the daughter teased.

“Not funny, Penny. After what he and his sister did, they should be in jail, not out having breakfast among normal people.”

“What they did? Mom, they got fired. By their grandfather. They weren’t even cops long enough to do anything. Also, I seriously doubt they cheated. They’re both brilliant. I’m not buying it.”

"Well, if they cheated, and their grandfather *fired them, then he must know the truth. I don't want you associating with them, Penny. Hear me?"*

I sipped my coffee and looked up at Sin. He rolled his eyes, then smiled at Missy as she brought our plates. "Thank you," I said to her. She didn't even look at me, just leaned over enough to give Sin a look down her shirt as she put his plate down.

"Hope you don't get boob lint in your eggs," I said to Sin and Missy jerked back upright, glared at me, and stormed away. "Well, at least she *can* hear me. I was beginning to think I was invisible."

Sin smirked and shook his head before he sat up and started to eat. We were both quiet for a few minutes, just eating and listening to the various bits of gossip around us.

"Wow, did you know I've slept with all of the male and half of the female graduating class at the university?" I said, eyes wide. "I wonder when I was supposed to be able to do that. Was it before or after I got valedictorian?"

"And I'm supposed to be a drug dealer. I've created a brand-new drug and it makes anyone who takes it, want me," Sin said. In the back corner, two guys we knew from Benny's crew, burst out laughing at Sin's comment and gave him a thumbs up. It would appear that they were the only shifters in the restaurant.

"Gee, Sinclair, I didn't know you had to drug your dates," I teased. The food was good, but the bullshit we were listening to was ruining my appetite. "You almost done enough to get this show rolling?" That last bit was barely breathed in my brother's direction.

He gave me the faintest of nods.

"You know this is all your fault, right?" I said, my voice pitched slightly louder than normal.

"How is this *my* fault? You're the one who wouldn't kiss the old bastard's ring," Sin said.

"It wasn't his *ring* he wanted me to kiss. But you can kiss his ass all you want," I said.

"We've already got the money, I'm not kissing anything. In fact, after he decided to lie about us and take our badges, he can kiss *my* ass," Sin said and finished his coffee.

"I think we should just celebrate our freedom. Shop, party, whatever we want," I said.

I could hear the indignant whispers of how we were clearly spoiled brats with no sense of civic duty. If they only knew.

"Sounds like a plan to me, sis," Sin said. "Let's go." He dropped a hundred-dollar bill on the table and we got up and left.

Whether he ever called Missy, it wouldn't matter. She just made eighty bucks.

* * *

Sin

It took every bit of my control to not respond to the whispered comments we both could overhear in the diner. Every ounce of my acting skill to keep the smirking smile on my face. To play the spoiled rich brat. Sid and I went to pick up a few things at the stores, then headed home. We couldn't keep the farce up long enough to do lunch in public. I picked up some Chinese food and we settled in the living room with the TV tuned to the local news. Small town news usually revolved around high school sports, local politics, community events, and local crime. Today, the news showed a story about a supposed wild animal attack on an off-duty BPD detective. The detective received treatment at the medical center and was released. Name withheld pending further investigation.

I grabbed my phone and dialed Stumpy. “Hey Stumpy, it’s Sin. You okay?” I put him on speaker and set the phone on the coffee table. “Sid’s here too.”

“I’m fine. Fifteen stitches that’ll be healed up by tonight, but I’ll have to pretend otherwise. How did you know it was me?” Stumpy said.

“Just saw the newscast and had a feeling. They started with your car, they’re going to keep escalating until they take you down,” I said.

“Or until we take them down first,” Sid said.

“I’ve heard that you kids put on a good show at the diner. A couple of calls came into the station for us to, and I quote, “keep an eye on you two” because you were cop trained and looking to cause trouble. You’re not going to cause me any trouble, are you?” Stumpy asked.

“Not any more than we usually do,” I said.

“That’s what I was afraid you were going to say,” Stumpy sighed. “Look, your dad wants me to take a couple of weeks off and get lost in the woods. I’m going to do just that. You know how to reach me and I won’t be too far.”

“We understand, Stumpy. Stay safe and we’ll see you in a bit,” Sid said.

“Talk to you soon, Stumpy,” I said and disconnected the call.

“Well, at least he’ll be safe with Dad and Grampa,” Sid said. “I was starting to wonder if we were going to get a call that he’d been taken out. He didn’t tell us much, on purpose, because who knows who might be listening.”

“Do you want any of this sweet and sour chicken?”

“Gods, how can you focus on food when there’s so much going on?”

“Look, Sid. First off, there’s some excellent food here. Secondly, we’re stuck waiting until we hear about a meeting of the League. Until they call us for backup to protect Keith Roberts, we’ve got nothing to do but pretend to *not* be cops. Have some of this chicken and later we’ll go for a run or something, okay?”

Sid flopped back on the couch and sighed. “I cannot *stand* sitting around. Patience may be a virtue, but I’m not *that* virtuous a woman.”

I almost snorted a noodle. “Virtue, ethics, morals, they’re all things we hold dear. But some more dear than others, eh?”

“I’m good with all of them except patience,” Sid said. “But then, you know that.”

I tossed her an egg roll. “Eat, watch television, read a book. Then we’ll go for a run.”

Sid opened the package and bit into the egg roll, then leaned forward and dipped it into a hot mustard sauce. “Fine, I’ll eat and watch TV. Then we’re going for a run. I can be impatient, but I’m not going to let myself get fat.”

“Sid, you’re part shifter. You would have to eat like ten thousand calories a day, for weeks, to even get chubby. Relax.”

We watched a couple of movies, then went for a run. It wasn’t until nearly ten at night when the phone call finally came. There was a meeting of the Purist League in two days.

Chapter Nineteen

Sid

Seven at night, this time of year, was twilight. We found ourselves dressed in black tactical gear, in position around an old, one-story elementary school that had been converted to a community center. Tonight, it was being used by a group registered as The Cultural Exchange Commission. According to the center's records, the group numbered about thirty to forty members. So far, we'd seen about twenty go inside. The first five that went in about an hour ago carried food trays and bags, so that was the setup and prep crew. After about twenty minutes, people started showing up in singles or small groups. Sin had a camera that was grabbing shots of each person and we'd already identified Professors Angiers, Lang, and Lang's son, Samuel. A few of the expelled cadets went in, then Lord James showed up. He got out of a black town car with another man that looked familiar, but I couldn't place him.

I heard an intake of breath through my earbud, though, and then Sin said, "Sebastian LeFleur. Talk about deep fucking pockets."

Dad spoke through the coms, "Keep focused, everyone. Things just got real interesting."

"Isn't LeFleur a witch?" I asked.

Grampa Walsh answered, "He is, an old and supposedly powerful one, but I have never seen him do much to prove that. A lot of hearsay because there were powerful ones in his family. So, LeFleur for the witches and James for the shifters."

Sin spoke into the coms then, “Keith just went inside with two other young men.”

Sett answered, “I’ve got the recording going here in the van. Clear and loud.”

Auntie Sett was in the command van while Dad, Grampa, Sin, me, and a dozen of Grampa’s people were spaced around the center. If Keith got into trouble, we could be inside in moments and back him up. We weren’t expecting to need to do that, but better to plan for it and not need it.

“Okay, Sid. You go back to the van with Sett. I don’t want her there alone in case someone comes sniffing around,” Grampa said.

“Yes, sir,” I replied and slowly made my way back from my position towards the van. I nodded to Tasha Campbell as she moved in to take my place. Tasha had helped with a couple of the Academy shifter classes as an assistant teacher and was a solid team member to have on our side.

I tapped twice on the back of the van, then opened the door just enough to slide inside and shut it quietly behind me. I pulled off my helmet and glasses, stuffed my gloves into the helmet and found a seat next to Sett. She handed me a headset so I could hear the audio while we watched the live feed from Keith’s button camera.

“This is pretty good quality,” I said, my voice kept low.

“Your Grampa doesn’t mess around. Best equipment he can find, we get to use,” Sett said.

We watched as the gathering made their way to rows of chairs while Grandpa Boudreau and Mr. LeFleur went up to a table in front with four chairs on one side. They sat down and a young man brought them drinks and a plate of snacks. Another set a carafe of coffee and a pitcher of water on the table, with two more cups.

“Who else do you think sits up there with them?” I asked Sett.

“Two more rich assholes?” Sett snarked. She handed me a bag of my favorite chips and a can of cold espresso, then popped her own open and sipped. “The best part about surveillance. The snacks.”

I laughed and pulled the bag open.

“You know who LeFleur is, don’t you?” Sett asked.

“Other than an old, rich, witch? No.”

“Over the past fifty years or so, LeFleur has made about twenty offers on the Fortin farm. Each one was incrementally more generous. And each time, the answer has been ‘no fucking way’. And he doesn’t take no for an answer.”

“Do you think he’s behind this Purist League crap? Like Lord James?”

“You mean, are they the two that started it up? No. They’re the bankroll and the muscle. We haven’t yet figured out who is the one pulling all the strings.”

“What *do* we know?”

“About thirty years ago, a decade or two after the Species War, the racist crap started to ramp up significantly. It wasn’t just bigots screaming about this side or that being better, but targeted attacks on both sides. A witch-owned store gets firebombed. A shifter family gets harassed until they move out of town. Back and forth until people were starting to worry about another full-on war coming again. The SPD and Academy were still pretty new at that time and they had their hands full trying to get things to quiet down. They arrested a lot of low-level punks who were behind the antics and the most they ever got out of any of them was that *She* would be coming for them. We still have no idea who *She* is or was. The SPD cracked down hard, again, about twenty years ago, and cleaned up most of the active gangs. Then, Liam Walsh was murdered, and James Boudreau took over the SPD. Hindsight being what it is, we can see now that from that point on, it was a slow, insidious growth of this Purist League, and the division and breaking down of the basic tenets the SPD and the Academy were founded upon.”

Sett stopped talking as the meeting started to come to order. The two seats beside LeFleur were still empty. A microphone was handed to Lord James and he got to his feet.

"Good evening, everyone," James said. "Welcome to the monthly meeting of the League for Purity Among Species. If this is your first meeting, please stand up,"

Keith did us the favor of turning around to look, so we got to see two young women giggling as they stood and a stoic, older man. I got on the computer and sent the images to Tasha's brother, Tino. Antonio "Tino" Morales, a recent graduate of MIT and technological genius, was back at the house he shared with his sister. One room of the house was a tech junkie's dream and wholly Tino's world.

While we watched the video of them going over the previous meeting's minutes, Tino did his magic and was soon sending us back his results.

"The girls are Inez and Jana Peters from Sorsyville who attend the university and live on campus. They're listed as witches. The man is Michael Burley, a shifter who does handyman work around town. Came to town about six months ago from the city. He's been mostly hired to work on James Boudreau's properties." I read off the information so everyone on the coms could hear it. "So, what? Lord James can't get enough locals to follow his bullshit ideas, he has to import them from elsewhere?"

"Either that or new folks coming into town are easy pickings," Dad said over the coms.

"You've all been given your assignments. I want to congratulate Mr. Angiers and Ms. Lang for achieving the rank of Deputy after their work in removing the Boudreau twins from the SPD roster. Mr. Samuel Lang, please stand up," James said.

"Assignments? We'll have to ask Keith what those are and how they get them," I said.

Samuel stood from his seat in the front row.

"Mr. Lang," James continued. "In light of your excellent work, you will be partnered with Mr. Roberts in the next phase of our plan."

We watched the video as Keith stood, a few rows back and across the aisle from Samuel.

"Meet with Mr. LeFleur after we break for refreshments to get your assignments."

"Yes, sir," both men said, then took their seats.

"Remember, everyone. Keep your eyes open and your mouths shut. Do your assignments and contact your team leader when it is done. For you new folks, that's Mr. Angiers for shifters and Ms. Lang for witches. Now, line up and come get your bounty."

James sat back down and LeFleur got up and moved to stand in front of the table. A man dressed as a bodyguard set a cardboard file box down on the table and took off the lid. LeFleur reached in and pulled out a handful of envelopes and started passing one to each person as they came up to him. Keith got his envelope and wandered off to a position against the side wall and opened the envelope so we could see what was inside. Ten crisp, hundred-dollar bills were in the envelope. He folded the envelope up and tucked it inside his jacket, then went to get a bottle of water while he waited with Samuel to speak to LeFleur when he was done.

"Did you know Keith was getting paid a grand every time he went to a meeting?" I asked.

"Yeah, he keeps offering to turn it into the team and we keep telling him to just keep it. He's the one taking the risks, he should get to keep the cash. Not like any of us are hurting for it," Sett said.

"That's cool that he keeps trying to share it, but better that he keeps it. What if they asked him to buy something and he told them he didn't have the cash?" I said.

“See? That’s why you’re on the team. Details focused,” Sett said.

“That’s the only reason, huh?” I teased.

“Keep yapping when we’re supposed to be listening and it will be,” Sett teased back.

I sipped some water and watched the last few get their envelopes before LeFleur gestured to Keith and Samuel to join him away from everyone else.

“You two have been chosen, based on the good work you’ve done so far,” LeFleur said.

The two young men glanced at each other, then back to LeFleur.

“I also wanted only witches. Can’t truly trust something that turns into an animal now, can you?” LeFleur said.

Both guys chuckled and nodded.

“Samuel, you keep working with Jolie Fortin. Keith? I want you to figure out a way to get Sidonie and Sinclair Boudreau up to their grandfather’s place. Mrs. Sullivan wants to speak with them.”

“There’s nothing left for me to do with Jolie. She’s already made the potions and the woman is weak and dying. If I keep hanging around, they’ll figure out something’s up,” Samuel said.

“Then get Jolie out of there and bring her to my place. She’s the key to me taking over that farm, once and for all,” LeFleur said.

I almost dropped my bottle of water when Sett snarled. I reached out a hand to squeeze her arm in warning. They were still talking.

“Which Mrs. Sullivan, sir? The gardener’s wife?” Keith asked.

LeFleur laughed at Keith and sighed. “We’re reduced to working with idiots. I swear,” was muttered before he looked back at Keith. “No, you idiot. Mrs. Margot Sullivan. The woman living in James Boudreau’s house as if she were his wife.”

“But isn’t she a witch?” Keith asked. “And he’s a shifter?”

"Eh, she's too old to breed. A hole's a hole once they can't make babies," LeFleur retorted.

I hissed into the coms, "We can't take them down tonight. We need to let Keith take us to the manse. It's the easiest way for us to get in there and finish this."

Grampa Walsh spoke then. "I agree."

Sin added, "I'm with Sid on this one."

"Alright, wait for Keith to leave and scoop him up, then everyone back to the barn," Grampa Walsh said. "Sett, you and Sid can get Keith. Sin? You and Tasha leave once the meeting is completely done and Keith is clear. Everyone else? Back to base. Oh, and Sett, make sure Tino gets everything from tonight. LeFleur just made our case for us."

We all commented that we'd received our instructions and I sat back to watch the rest of the feed, my mind whirling. I looked over at Sett and there were unshed tears in her eyes. "Auntie?" I asked.

"Jolie is responsible for nearly killing your mother. For all we know, she *has* weakened her enough for her to die. The girl that grew up like a little sister to me…"

"Auntie, I have faith in Grandma and Evelyn Rue. The specialist they took Mom to, will figure it all out. In fact, let me text Grandma to let her know what we heard."

Sett grabbed my hand. "No, I'll call Mom and tell her what we heard. She'll keep Jolie away from your Mom and I'll grab Tasha or someone to go get Jolie. We'll put her under arrest in one of the cells we've got in the barns until the whole mess is figured out. She'll be comfortable and safe, and away from anyone she could hurt or help."

I nodded to Sett's words and sat back to keep an eye on Keith as he did his best to socialize before finally saying goodnight and heading out. Sett stepped out of the van to make her call and climbed back in about the time Keith pulled up on his

bicycle. Sett sent the files to Tino and I helped Keith pull the bike into the van, then we headed out. I got the button camera and microphone off of Keith and put them in the padded case, then handed him a bottle of water.

"You did very well in there. Got us a ton of good information," I said.

Keith gave me a crooked smile. "I suspected which Mrs. Sullivan they were talking about, but I wanted LeFleur to be very clear so we'd have the information for the case. That woman gives me the absolute willies."

"Margot Sullivan?" Sett asked Keith.

"Yeah. I've met her twice before. Every time I feel like she's peeling not just my clothes off, but my skin. Like she can see inside my head and wants to lick my brain or something."

"Eww…" I said, along with the appropriate gagging sounds.

"Yeah, that sounds like Margot. And she probably wants to lick something, but I doubt it's your brain," Sett replied.

"Oh, gods," Keith groaned. "Not even funny. She's like my grandmother's age, for god sake."

"And has the body of a twenty-five-year-old. Her magic is incredibly powerful. Oh, also, she probably *can* see inside your head. I'll see if I can find a charm that helps shield your thoughts before you take the twins to the manse," Sett said.

"One for me too, please," I said. "And Sin. He can shield better than all of us, but he'll get distracted by her looks for at least a second or two and then it's all over."

We all laughed, then I leaned over towards Sett. "Mom safe?"

Sett nodded. "Grandma left the phone on speaker, called Jolie into the room, and cast a spell on her right there. Then they used the binding cuffs on her and cuffed her to a pipe until I can go get her tomorrow. She won't be able to use any magic with those cuffs on, so she's not going anywhere. It took me a bit to calm your grandmother down, though. She wanted to come home and pluck every hair from Sebastian LeFleur's body with burning tweezers."

Keith shuddered and I gave him a look. “You don’t fuck with our family. Not and walk away whole.”

Keith whispered, “Sooo glad I’m on *your* side. So glad.”

Chapter Twenty

Sin

It was two nights after the League meeting and Sid and I were headed with Keith to the manse. All three of us were wearing button cameras and mics as well as spelled charms from Sett that would help shield our thoughts. To add to the plan, Sid and I were pretending to be drugged and out of it. The story we were pitching was that Keith met up with us to hang out, drugged our drinks and got us out to his car before we fully passed out. It wasn't the most elegant of plans, but it was so simple, it could work.

Keith announced himself at the gate and then drove up to the house. The front door was open when he pulled up and two big guys in suits came out. They must've been shifters because one lifted Sid and the other lifted me as if we weighed no more than a big bag of dog food.

Keith followed behind.

We were gently laid on two couches in the back parlor, then the two men left the room.

Keith whispered, "Just us, but I hear her heels."

Sid groaned and shifted on the couch. She would be the first one to awaken, and I'd listen, then I'd stir.

Keith spoke as soon as Margot came to the doorway. "Mrs. Sullivan, I have brought them as ordered."

"Good job, boyo."

Margot Sullivan had an Irish accent.

"Do you want me to stay in case the drugs don't keep them docile enough for you?" Keith asked.

"No, I can handle anything these two dish up. You go ahead into the kitchen. Cook has prepared some food. I'll send for you when I'm ready," Margot said.

"Yes, ma'am," Keith replied, and I could hear his steps as he left the room.

Sid groaned again and spoke. "Where am I? Grandfather's house? What's going on?"

"Shh, lassie. Everything's fine. I'm Margot, let me help you sit up, aye?"

The way I was lying, an arm thrown over my face, I could watch them and unless they were looking directly at me, they'd think I was still out. I saw Margot, her silver-blond hair in an elegant up-do, wearing a pale blue silk dress that fell to just past her knees. Good thing I was consciously regulating my breathing, or I would've sucked in a breath at the sight of her. Perfection.

Sid groaned and leaned forward, elbows on her knees, head bowed into her hands. "Water, please? My head is pounding. What happened?"

"You and your brother seemed to have had a little too much to drink. Your grandfather wanted to have you come by for lunch, to meet me. Keith dropped you by. Don't you remember?"

Sid shook her head. "I don't remember."

Margot handed her a bottle of water and I was relieved to see Sid crack the seal herself before she drank.

I saw Sid wiggle her fingers, so I groaned and shifted on the couch.

"Sin," Sid gasped and stumbled over to my side. She pressed the bottle of water to my lips, and I sipped and groaned.

"Sid, where are we?"

"Boudreau Manor," she said.

"What?" I sat up and looked around. Margot smiled at me and I swear my heart skipped a beat. She wasn't even my type, but I couldn't stop staring.

Sid slopped some of the water on my face and it was enough to break whatever charm spell had been wrapped around me. I reached for the bottle and Sid let me take it. I drained it and leaned back, not letting my gaze linger on Margot so as not to be caught again. Sid grabbed another bottle, cracked it open and sat beside me.

"Sin, this is Margot Sullivan. Somehow, we forgot that we were supposed to meet her this afternoon for lunch here at our grandfather's house. We drank too much and Keith brought us by. That was awful nice of him, wasn't it?" Sid said.

"Yeah, really nice. Too bad we didn't have a chance to dress appropriately," I said. Both Sid and I were wearing jeans, short hiking boots, and sweatshirts.

"I'm sure your grandfather will just be happy to see you," Margot said.

"You clearly don't know our grandfather very well," Sid replied.

A throaty chuckle spilled into the room, full of honeyed promises and sultry dreams. I couldn't stop the shiver as Margot spoke. "Oh, I know your grandfather *very* well."

Sid let out a rude snort, "That's what she said."

I couldn't stop the laughter at that point and pushed to my feet. "Well, where is the old bastard?"

"Oh, I'm sure he'll be joining us soon enough," Margot said. I felt a tickle of warning then, and it took me a second to figure out that it was coming from my bracelet. I glanced at Sid and her fingers were wrapped around her pendant. The faintest of nods from my sister told me that she'd been warned of impending danger as well.

I started toward the doorway. "Let me guess, he's in his office? I'll just pop down there and say hi."

"I think not," Margot said. My bracelet flared with heat and if I hadn't lifted my hand to grip my sleeve, I would've walked face-first into the barrier. As it was, my

knuckles grazed it and I skidded to a stop. I lifted my fingers to brush the air in front of me and met a solid, invisible wall.

Behind me, I heard Sid. "Oh, no you don't," and then a thud. "No one messes with my brother, but me."

The barrier dissolved and I turned to see Sid pulling binding cuffs off her belt and slapping them on an unconscious Margot's wrists.

"What did you hit her with?" I asked.

Sid reached out for a little statuette on the table next to her. "This, but I made sure I wasn't going to kill her with it."

"Good job. Let's hide her behind that couch so if anyone comes in, the room looks empty. I've got some cable ties we can put on her ankles."

We got Margot settled behind the couch, even using one of the wide fabric curtain ties as a gag. I gripped Sid's shoulders and spoke to the button camera. "I'm going to see if I can find James, and I want Sid to go find Keith and make sure he's okay. Our protection warned us of danger, and mine is still a little warm, so all is not clear yet. Something is *definitely* going on here."

Sid nodded at me. "My pendant is still warm, too. I'll head towards the kitchen along the back. You check the office and if he's not there, check the front half and we'll meet in the kitchen. Stay safe."

"You, too," I told her, and we left the room and split up in the hallway.

I kept a spell in the back of my mind in case I needed it as I made my way through the house. Things looked quite a bit different from the last time we were here. A lot of the heavier furniture had been replaced with more delicate pieces. Two of the rooms I passed had been painted and given new drapes. The antique Persian rug that had decorated the hall outside James' office was gone and a flowered circle carpet lay there instead. I was about to cross it when the bracelet flared again, and I pulled my foot back. "Something's up with this carpet. I'm going

to edge around it to try and get into the office," I whispered so the crew listening to our button mics could hear me.

I slid my back along the wall and reached for the doorknob. A twist, a push and the door was open, but I was going to have to jump to get past the rug and into the room. I took a few steps back, ran towards the doorway and jumped. My hands grabbed for the door frame and I spun myself around so I ended up with my back against the inside wall as my feet hit the floor. At first glance, the room was empty.

"Well shit, all that and he's not here." A few steps into the room and I heard a low growl. The bracelet hadn't stopped being warm, so I knew I was still in trouble. Slowly I turned toward the growl and saw my grandfather in wolf form. "Hey, Grandpa. Want to shift back so we can talk?"

He growled again, ears back, with his lip curling to show his teeth. His eyes looked strange. Usually, when a shifter is in animal form, you can still see the human intelligence and clarity in their eyes. If I hadn't seen my grandfather shifted before, I would not have assumed this was a shifter. His eyes looked wrong. I said as much, my voice kept soft, and hoped like hell the mic picked it up.

"James Boudreau, I need you to shift back," I said. This time, I put some commanding tone into my voice.

He snapped and snarled, stiff-legged in his approach. I stood my ground until he lunged. I snapped a fist out and hit the side of his muzzle, knocking him to the side. He stumbled and it gave me enough time to turn and race towards the French doors to the back patio. I slammed into the door hard enough to snap the top lock off but the bottom lock held. As I stepped back to kick the door, the weight of the wolf hit me, and drove me to my knees. Teeth sank into my shoulder and I screamed, rolling to the side so I could punch at the muzzle beside my face. He wouldn't let go, just ground his jaw and I screamed again. The pain was scrambling my brain but I wasn't going to go down like this. I choked out a spell and slapped my palm against the wolf's head. He yelped and released me, shaking his head as the

spell made him feel like bees were buzzing inside and outside his skull. I stumbled to my feet and hit the window, the blood loss making me dizzy. The door to the patio beside me crashed open and Grampa Walsh grabbed me and pulled me out while Dad ran past him inside. I heard another snarl, a gunshot – then silence. I gave Grampa a weak smile as blackness wrapped around me and I was out.

Chapter Twenty-One

Sid

I checked the rooms as I made my way to the kitchen. I noticed a lot of changes in the décor – changes Margot must've made in her time here. When I got to the kitchen, only Keith was there. He sat at the table by the side windows, a cup of coffee in front of him and a plate with some small pastries arranged on it. Nothing looked like it had been touched and he kept watching the two doorways and the windows.

When I came in, he got to his feet and smiled. "Glad to see you're up and about."

"Yeah, where's the cook?"

"She left to do the shopping. Are we done here?"

"Soon as Sin finds James, we're done. Have you spoken to anyone?"

"No, I didn't want to compromise anything," he said.

"Good idea. Okay, let's go back and keep an eye on Margot. I don't trust her, even if she is cuffed."

We hurried back to the room and I checked on Margot. She was awake and furious, which made me feel relieved for a couple of reasons. One, I hadn't killed her and two, she was not happy. Her not being happy had just become one of my life goals.

"Aww, Margot. Having a rough day?" I asked.

She yelled into the gag and I chuckled. "Looks like it. You just stay right there, and someone will be by to take care of you soon enough."

I looked up at Keith. "Did you see where the bodyguards went?"

“Yeah, they were outside until a couple of ours got them cuffed and into the van.”

“Good. I was expecting them to come barging in and make things interesting.” Keith dragged a chair over to sit where he could watch Margot and the doorway. I had just picked up another bottle of water when I heard the gunshot. The bottle hit the floor and I was racing to the doorway, Keith behind me. I yelled back “Stay with her,” and ran towards the office. My pendant flared hot when I stepped one foot on the circular rug, so I leaped backward and landed on my butt on the floor. I grabbed a delicate wooden chair and used it to flip the rug up and over onto itself. A small marble made its way into my hand and I peered around the doorway. The patio doors were cracked and open, blood was all over one door and the floor, but it was my father that caught my attention. He stood over the body of his father where it lay curled in the middle of the floor.

“Dad?” I said and he turned, gun raised for a moment before he saw it was me, then he lowered it and slid it into his holster.

“I had to,” he said. “He was killing Sin.”

“Sin?”

“He’ll be okay. He’s outside with the Commander.”

I walked around the body on the floor and hugged my Dad. He turned and hugged me tightly, burying his face in my hair.

“Dad, I love you.”

“I love you, too, Siddie. Are you okay? Hurt at all?” He stepped back, hands still on my upper arms as he looked me over.

“I’m fine, Dad. Margot is still in the parlor with Keith. She’s got dampener cuffs, cable ties, and a gag on. I still don’t trust her, though. Can we get her secured?”

“Yeah. Let’s get her out of here and then I need to call this in.”

* * *

It had been a busy few days, but things were finally settling down. The SPD had handled the scene at the manor and James Sinclair Boudreau had been buried in the family crypt two days later with no ceremony. No one wanted to celebrate the life of a man who had done so many bad things to his own family. The will was simple and clear. It all went to Dad but for a couple of small monetary behests. Twenty thousand to Brian, a hundred thousand to each of the house staff, and one million to the Academy's scholarship fund. Brian heard about James' death and took off for California before we'd even had the body interred. We doubted we'd ever hear from Brian again, now that the money had dried up with James' death.

Dad and Mom had moved into Boudreau Manor and offered us each a wing at the house of our own. Sin and I told them we'd consider it once they were done remodeling the whole place. Turned out that Margot had scattered charms and spells all through the house. The rug in front of the office door would make whoever walked on it amenable to any suggestions she spoke. Good thing Sin and I had both avoided it, or she could have talked herself out of our custody.

Mom was back to her old self once more and she and Dad were taking an extended vacation down through Mexico. It started with a cruise that they were leaving for tonight, so dinner was a celebration and bon voyage at Grandma Fortin's house.

Mom's favorite lasagna, garlic knots, and salad were the featured menu, followed by Dad's favorite, German Chocolate cake. Other than our folks and us, Grampa Walsh, Auntie Sett, and Grandma were present. Jolie was under house arrest at Abraham Ricker's shop. The old apothecary had wanted to try and turn Jolie's skills back towards the good. It seems she had been dating a member of the League in secret and he had convinced her that keeping Mom weak would benefit them both. He did try to talk her into killing Mom, but Jolie broke up with him

after that phone call. They were already at Abraham's when that call came through and she broke down in tears and told Grandma, Evelyn Rue, and Abraham the whole story. Me? I wanted to take her out into the woods and beat her senseless, heal her ass up and do it again. I guess keeping her at Ricker's and seeing if he could turn her around was a better plan. Sort of.

The meal was over, and we were having coffee and wine with dessert.

Grampa Walsh interrupted the conversation when he said, "Oh, Andre. I forgot to tell you they picked up Sebastian LeFleur today. After about an hour, he gave us a full confession and will be spending the rest of his life in Galliol. Margot Sullivan was delivered to Galliol this morning."

We were all silent for a moment, sobered by the thought of a lifetime spent in the stark confines of the country's supernatural prison.

"What was Margot's game?" I asked.

"She seduced LeFleur and James into doing her will. Turns out she's Fae. Half Siren, half Lamia," Dad said.

"Good thing you didn't let her seduce you," Mom teased.

"She didn't have to do much to start to pull you under. I was in her presence for about fifteen minutes and felt the power. It was creepy," Sin said.

"Didn't it seem like she went down too easily?" I said.

"Margot was focused on Sin. Seems she has wanted his power for a while," Sett said. "After she started to tell her story, we also learned that Margo was the 'she' that had been at the beginning of it all thirty years ago."

"She also told James to kill you two. She planned to take you to his office, incapacitated, and let him kill you in his shifted form," Dad continued. "Fortunately, she had no idea that you two were so strong, or that you had backup."

Sin rolled his shoulder. He'd healed pretty quickly, but it was going to be tender for a few days. "Thank gods for that backup, Dad."

I reached out and squeezed Dad's hand. "I'm sorry you had to kill him."

"I am too, but he was too far gone. For him to have tried to kill all of us, there was no coming back from that," Dad said.

"So, why did Margot want them to do this Purist League crap?" I asked.

"The kind of Fae she is is never truly accepted. As a result, Margot decided to create chaos. The more, the better. If she could get the shifters and witches to kill each other off, then there would be more for the Fae to take into their control. Unfortunately, while she had a good plan for the long game, she didn't take into consideration that pretending to be a witch put her firmly in one camp over the other. The shifters never fully trusted her, and after you two publicly turned on James, a lot of the good shifters started to lose faith in him, too. That's why she wanted to take you two out. Make it look like you'd tried to attack her and James and then kill you, putting James firmly back in the trustworthy column," Grampa Walsh explained. "She didn't understand that people were questioning James *because* they knew how good you two were. They knew your parents and knew the good you've all done behind the scenes for the community. Her plan would have never worked."

"What about Brian?" Sin asked. "Are you really going to let him escape to California, unscathed?"

Grampa Walsh and Dad both started to chuckle.

"Oh, he's not unscathed. We called the SPD branch in Sacramento and they picked him up at the condo he was renting. Tino had been keeping tabs on Brian and found his computer full of filth. We didn't have to do a thing other than informing the local SPD. They have about as much appreciation for pedophiles as we do. Brian will be spending the next few decades in solitary at the state penitentiary," Grampa said.

"Yeah, they'll keep him in solitary, so he doesn't get killed by the other prisoners when they find out why he's in. Brian may be a shifter, but he's not very powerful,

so a regular cell will hold him," Dad said.

Sett drained her wine glass and held it out for a refill. "After the Commander was announced as alive and returning to run the SPD and reorganize the Academy, I got to spend the day with Lang and Angiers. They've both been sent up to the G as well. Samuel Lang is under psychiatric rehabilitation, as are about twenty of the other Purist members. The rest were given a citation and a warning. Other than those few going through psych rehab, the rest were just there for the money. Angiers is going for the kidnapping and assault of you, Sid, and the attempted assault on two other students while I was on suspension. Lang is going for financial fraud and bodily harm to students under her care. She's the one that set up the two students to be assaulted by Angiers, but the students crippled Angiers and left him in the combat center."

"Give me their names later," Grampa said. "I'll want to see about putting them on my Ops team."

"So, what's going to happen next?" I asked.

"Your father and I are going on a nice, long vacation and we'll be back in a month or two," Mom said and kissed Dad's cheek.

"When your Dad comes back, he'll be running the Academy. In the meantime, Sett and I are going to overhaul the whole mess and get us back on track. You two are going to take a week or so to relax and then you're going to get more training for the Special Ops program. Sid, you need some work on your shifter side and Sin needs some help with his spell work. Other than that, you're both exceptional and I'm so very proud of all you've done," Grampa said.

"Here, here!" rang out around the table and everyone lifted glasses to toast.

It was nice to be honored and appreciated, especially by my family.

"What about Keith Roberts?" Sin asked. "Is he going to keep working with the Special Ops team?"

"He will, yes," Sett said. "But he's also going to be taking over Angiers' classes for a while. He said he liked the fieldwork, but not all the time."

"Alright, everyone. Time for Amelia and I to get home. We've got an early flight tomorrow," Dad said as he rose from the table. Everyone got up to give them hugs and say our farewells, and Mom pulled me aside.

"I put the stuff you saved from the house in the safe," she told me and tucked a piece of paper into my hand. "That's the new access code to the safe. No one else has it. You two and we are the only ones I want to be able to get in there."

"Okay, Mom. I'll let Sin know and we'll make sure everything is secure."

Mom kissed my cheek and smiled at me. "I know you will, my girl. Be safe while we're gone?"

"Always, Mom," I said, then waved as she and Dad headed out to their car.

Sin, Sett, and I were cleaning up the dishes while Grampa and Grandma chatted. The laughter from the other room sounded good after all the stress and worry.

"So, what do you think of those two?" I asked Sett.

Sett wrinkled her nose and grinned. "I do *not* want to think about my mother's sex life, thanks very much."

Sin laughed at her and she swatted him with a towel. "I think they're cute together," he said.

"Cute? Oh, do *not* let Grandma know you said that," I said.

"What if I tell her?" Sett teased.

We both yelled and started to swat her back with our dishtowels as all three of us laughed.

Grampa whistled from the dining room doorway, and we all fell silent as we turned to look his way. He held up his phone and then put it back to his ear. "Yes, I can hear you now. Uh huh. Okay, send me the files and I'll call you in the morning," he said, then hung up.

“You three finish up and get some sleep. We’ve got a case to look over,” Grampa said.

“What kind of case?” Sett asked.

“People are disappearing. Four cases that seem to have similarities so far. The last disappearance was yesterday in Sorsyville. Meet at the SPD offices at eight tomorrow morning.”

Sett told us to head home and we said our farewells before Sin and I made our way back to the cottage.

“Our first official case,” Sin said.

“Yep. I hope it goes well. This will be the first one we do in the public eye, so to speak. No undercover, no pretending to not be cops. This is the real deal,” I said.

“Tomorrow will be our *real* Induction Day,” Sin said. “Not graduation, like Dad said.”

“Yeah, I think you’re probably right.”

We were inducted into the brotherhood, but tomorrow? That’s when we would publicly act like we were a real part of it. The first day of the next phase of our lives.

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Lastly, we authors ask often for reviews from our readers - and it's not an ego stroke. Most of us just skim the reviews for good quotes for advertising because reviews are for the readers. Reviews are also for those stores that base our ranking and advertising options off of the number and quality of our reviews. (Quality meaning number of stars, not number of words.) You can leave a three word review and it counts more than just clicking the star ranking on your e-reader. Please take

a moment and leave an honest review. It really is the best way to boost your authors. Thank you.

About the Author

T.K. Eldridge writes paranormal murder mystery, supernatural, and urban fantasy. When they're not writing, they are enjoying life in the Blue Ridge mountains of western North Carolina. Two dogs, two cats, a garden, a craft hobby and a love of Celtic Traditional music keep them from spending too much time at the computer.

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